FAITH RINGGOLD INTERVIEW
MAKERS: WOMEN WHO MAKE AMERICA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Faith Ringgold
Artist and Activist
July 15, 2011
Interviewed by Betsy West
Total Running Time: 1 hour, 10 minutes and 32 seconds

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ON SCREEN TEXT:

Makers: Women Who Make America

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BETSY WEST:

Tell me about your childhood.

FAITH RINGGOLD:

I was born in 1930 during the Great Depression. Well, and actually it was sort of like the end of the… No, in the Great Depression at a very interesting time.

You'd have thought that it would have been awful, but I had a fabulous childhood. People were wonderful, they helped each other, and I think it was because they knew they had to. And they—I remember my mother and my father… Of course, women didn't work. That's the thing that's very fascinating about that. That whole period before the war, meaning World War II. Before World War II, women in America basically were housewives.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

So my mother would have friends in and they would be talking. Some of their conversations, I learned to listen quietly as a child because if I didn't, I would be told to go to bed. And I wanted to hear what they were saying. I loved to hear the stories they told. Fascinating period, the 1930s. People coming up from the south to New York City. I lived in Harlem. And how they got here. I mean, it wasn't about just taking a train or a bus and arriving in New York. It was about sometimes going all the way out to California and working your way back to get to New York City. Fascinating period of time that people… And the ways in which people were able to survive and catch up with each other in different places in the country.

BETSY WEST:

Tell me a little bit about your mom. You say women didn't work, but tell me about what kind of person she was and then what she went on to do.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

My mother became a fashion designer. She always sewed, made clothes for us, and then later on for friends of hers. And she went to school at FIT and

learned how to cut patterns and became a fashion designer. When she went to work, that was in 1942, she got a job working in a factory that made Eisenhower jackets because the men went off to war in Europe and the women went to work. They had to take over some jobs that the men had left. And one of the things that was big was factory work, sewing army uniforms, and my mother saw that as a great opportunity for her to go to work and to learn how to use a power machine because she had a sewing machine, but it was an old Singer. It was beautiful, it had old paintings and stuff on it, but it was also a throttle. You know, you had to use your feet to make it go.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

So she wanted to learn how to use a power machine, which was electricity. And so she got a job working in a plant that made Eisenhower jackets. That was her first job. She was also able to divorce my father, which wasn't all that good, but they stayed friends, and I noticed that also. Men who were divorced from their wives… Not many people got divorced. People stayed together, more or less. Or even if they didn't stay together, they didn't divorce because it was difficult to do so. However, my mother did divorce my father, but he still was part of the family because there were three of us. So he was there a lot. And my mother was able to have her own life for the first time. I recognize how much she had to sacrifice so much of what she wanted to be as a person to raise her three children.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

She did a fabulous job and also got a chance to become a fashion designer and to have shows and do wonderful things. Sometimes I wish, but I often think

about it. She would be so amazed today to see the fashion industry and how African Americans are able to participate in that field. And when she was a fashion designer, she had people in the community, friends, and she was limited, extremely limited as to what she could do as a fashion designer, but she was very inventive and she achieved quite a bit, gave us a wonderful life. And my father also.

BETSY WEST:
And what impact did that have on you, seeing her not only achieve, but achieve doing something creative?

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FAITH RINGGOLD:
Well, it made me know I could do it. She was always in business for herself. She would get these jobs working in a factory when her business was slow and she'd quit in a minute, and she said, "I can go down the street and get another job. I don't have to stay there." She was very, very independent. And you would think she wouldn't be since most of our lives, we were taken care of by my father.

BETSY WEST:
What did you see, looking at her and seeing the work she was doing?

FAITH RINGGOLD:
That you should try it. You should not be afraid to be an entrepreneur, to get out there and do something on your own. You can do it.

BETSY WEST:

Any specific instances of sexism that you remember as a kid?

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

Oh, it was all over the place. I mean, come on. Oh, absolutely. I mean, it was more or less understood that women had a place, and their place was at home with the children. And I think that, well, for instance, me, I became an artist. However, I did not realize that I would be an artist when I was a child. I mean, it was not… I've heard a lot of artists say, "Oh, from the time I was a kid, I knew that one day I'd grow up and be an artist." No, I didn't know that. I knew I was doing art all the time. From the time I was a little kid, I always had my crayons, and my father brought me my first easel. I had my paint. I had my crayons. I had asthma all also as a child, so I was frequently home with asthma. And I had my books. My mother would go to school and find out what was going on at school so that she could homeschool me. And so I had my schoolwork and then I also had my art I did. I had art in school and I had my art to do at home. But I'm not going to say that I knew when I grew up I was going to be an artist. I didn't know anything about that.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

It didn't occur to me that art was something to be. I thought it was something to do. It's not that anybody told me, "You can't be an artist." No one ever said that. It's just that I never really thought about being something. I thought about doing something. And I was constantly doing art. Even when I went to school, I was the class artist. However, when I graduated from high school in

1948 and I went up to City College, because I had been told since I was a little kid that I was going to go to college. So I identified the City College because it was near my house in Harlem as the school that I was going to be going to.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

I loved those Gothic buildings and all the kids coming out of the subway on 145th Street and going up the hill to Convent train and going down Convent Avenue. And so I said, "I'm going to go to City College when I graduate from high school." So when I did in 1948 you had to, in those days, you had to say what you wanted to major in. You had to declare a major in order to matriculate for a degree. And so when I went up to City College and they asked me what did I want to major in, I said, "Art." What else? That was the first time I had given it a thought that I would actually be an artist.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

So I said, "Art." So they said, "Well, you can't really major in art here because this is a boys' school, and you can't get a… liberal arts degree. Women cannot matriculate for a liberal arts degree at City College." We're talking 1948. I was floored. Now, I do notice that all those kids that I saw coming up out of the subway and pouring up the hill and down to Convent, those were all boys, but it didn't occur to me, "I wonder why they're all boys. There's not a girl in the group." Incidentally, there weren't any Black people in the group either. But my mother never pointed any of that out. She just let me say, "Yes, I'm going to City College." We didn't talk about what I was going to be. I was going to City College.

BETSY WEST:

And did that impact you? Did that cramp your style at all?

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

Well, I was floored because I had resigned myself to going to college, going to City College, and being…now I wanted to be an artist and I'm finding out that I cannot get a liberal arts degree, which is what artists get. So what am I going to do? So they said, "Well, you can go to Hunter. You can go to Brooklyn College." I said, "No. I want to go to City College. That's the school where I set my goal for." So then somebody said, "Look, okay, let's say this. Why don't you major in art, fine art, minor in education, and then you can get a degree in art education? How's that?" I said, "Wow." "And you can teach art." I said, "You know, that's good."

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

My mother's father was a teacher. I had a lot of teachers in my family because my family comes from Florida. They all taught. "They'll like that." I don't know how my mother's going to feel about this art because I thought of her as an artist, but she didn't think of herself as an artist because she said, "I have customers. I don't know what you're talking about." Anyway, incidentally, my family loved it, the education part, and I could go to the school of education because they did accept women at the City College in those days. So that's what I did, and am I glad that I did that because I'm very connected to children, and their art, their creativity is alarming, how wonderful they are as artists when they're children. I've written 15 children's

books. I mean, it's just great, you know. And I probably wouldn't even know as much about them as artists if I had not had that experience at City College.

BETSY WEST:
When you graduated from college and emerged into the art world, who was running the show? Tell me a little bit about that atmosphere.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:
That was a rough situation. Yeah, that was not— I graduated from City College in 1955. I had gotten married in 1950, had two children in 1952, so that kind of… You had to stop going to school when you got pregnant in those days. I was amazed at the fact that my teachers didn't even want me to talk about the fact that I had two daughters, natural childbirth. They said, "Oh no, you shouldn't talk about that." Why not? I mean, you know, we're not babies here. What are you talking about? But things were completely different in those days. In 1955, I'm graduating—I get my bachelor's degree. I'm teaching now and I'm doing things in the community.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:
I'm having a show at the local barbershop. I'm trying to find ways to… In a church maybe. And then I move along and it gets more and more until I find my way. But it's not an easy situation, not for women, not for African Americans, not for artists because basically artists were thought of as being dead people. That you were living and you were an artist to be taken seriously was not something that most people accepted in those days.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

The gender aspect of it was not something that I understood immediately. The race thing was much more obvious because there was a great deal of racism. 1940s? Great deal of racism in every aspect of American life. So it was something that you looked for and recognized and understood completely. In 1960… I got my first gallery in 1963, The Spectrum Gallery. Okay. So it's '63. Now I've already gotten a master's degree. I've been out of school for a while. I've been to Europe. I've traveled. My children are growing up.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

There are something called cooperative galleries in New York, and I applied for one at The Spectrum Gallery. And I wasn't accepted immediately because the work that I was doing was political, and in those days, political art… Now, it's the '60s and everything is political, but not the art. The art was more or less abstract and non-political, no messages. "There's to be no messages," I would hear people say. Now, wait a minute. What do you mean no messages? I've got nothing but messages. I became an artist so that I could tell my story.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

My story as an artist is who I am. That's where the art comes from. It comes from the time, the place, the identity of the person doing it so that everybody's art has this distinction. That's the important aspect of visual art. It's a visual image of who you are, where you are, how you are, what you are. Now, artists can put it together in various different ways. They might just see it as colors or just as shapes or whatever, but certainly you want the

opportunity to see it in the way you do see it and not to have to disguise it or make it into something that's pleasing to others and not yourself.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

This became a problem and it was a problem right away. In the '60s, I would think that the reason why there was so much abstract art done at that time as opposed to political art done is because this was a period in which the galleries became… The galleries were mostly showing the work of living artists as opposed to artists who had passed away. You see? So they had to make money and they were trying to get artists in there, in their galleries, who did work that would be pleasing to the people who were collecting. That is not to say that the minimalist art, and the abstract expressionists, and the different abstract forms of art were not gorgeous. I think that some beautiful things came out of that whole period that was so political in every other way and wasn't in visual art.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

I just think that that has a lot to do with the reason why political art was actually frowned on in many ways. However, I was determined to do it my way. If you're going to be an artist, you're taking a chance anyway. You don't know whether or not you're going to be successful. You just will do what you want. And I figured, "Why the hell can I do what I want? I'm determined to do what I want." So I did. I went to this gallery, Spectrum Gallery on 57th Street, and applied to get in there. And it was a cooperative gallery, which meant that the artists actually supported the gallery. They would hire a director and then they would support the gallery. The gallery dealer's name was Robert

Newman, and he presented my work to the different people in the gallery and they turned me down.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

He called me up and he told me, he said, "You've been turned down, but I'm not going to accept no. I'm going to continue to work to get you into this gallery. I want you here." And he said, "So give me some more time." And I did, and he did, and I did get to be in Spectrum Gallery. And Robert Newman is somebody that— I don't know where he is today, but he gave me my first break.

BETSY WEST:

And why was it that they didn't want to let you in?

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

Because, as I said, they were all abstract artists. They were all painting one color, two colors, whatever, very beautifully doing their work. Nobody was painting any kind of…American people series like I was doing, you know, the struggle between Black and white. They're not doing any of that. Everybody else was in different fields. The music was about what was going on in America. Even the dancing, the whole thing. Literary—people writing, were definitely writing about what was going on in America, but not the art. And anyway, I did get to be in that gallery. I had my first one person show in 1967 and it was very successful. I got written about in all the major art magazines and in the *New York Times*. It was fabulous. 400 people came to the opening.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

And then I had another one in '69. It was wonderful what was happening. And then, in the meantime, I'm working with different artists, African American artists, just to try to open up the museums so that African American artists could show their work in these museums, which were actually public institutions in many ways, committed to the public good, 501(c)(3). I didn't realize that. And with a commitment to serve the people. However, one could not find art by African Americans in any of these museums. Why not? Incidentally, that's going on today, still. Part of the reason is that there's no designated genre of African American artists in these museums, and there should be. There is a designated culture. There's a history. There should be the art to go with it.

BETSY WEST:
You were involved in the fight to open things up. Be a little more specific. What exactly did you do?

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FAITH RINGGOLD:
The Whitney Museum had a show called 30 Americans, but not one Black artist was in the show. Jacob Lawrence, however, was in the collection of the Whitney, but even he was not in the show. And a lot of people were very upset about that. They were talking about it. There was a little article in the *New York Times* and so on. And I went to the meeting. They had a meeting at the studio museum in Harlem and I went to the meeting and I said, "Listen, why don't we demonstrate?" Everybody demonstrates about everything. This was a highly political time, 1960s. "Let's demonstrate. We don't have to take this. We can demonstrate. Let's take it to the street." And so some people looked at

each other and they said, "Well, we don't want to get everybody all upset." The artists will say, "We don't want to make the museum angry with us." Oh, they're not angry with you. They don't even know you're here. They're leaving you out. So what difference does it make? Let's go. Let's do it. And we did.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:
And it started… This was the first demonstration against a museum anywhere in this country for purposes such as I just mentioned against racist policies. And I realized that… And then from there we went to the Museum of Modern Art, which had the same thing going on. I realized when they began to open up, they would call the guys inside to sit around the table to talk to the curators and to the directors. You understand? But not me because I'm a woman. So I was good for demonstrating, passing out leaflets and stuff, but I wasn't good for sitting around the table.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:
So I said, "Wait a minute. I don't think I understand this. You mean to say I can't sit around the table and talk trash with the guys?" Well, you know, obviously not. And nobody kind of thought that was wrong, not the guys inside, nor outside. I said, "Something's not right here."

BETSY WEST:
So then what did you do about that?

FAITH RINGGOLD:

Well, I decided that I needed to get involved with women's issues because other than that, I am being effective, but I'm not being effective on a personal level. It's not something that I as a woman can benefit from, and that doesn't make sense because people do not get involved with movements that don't personally affect themselves. I mean, this is very true. We all know this. Okay. So I said "Hm." Some of the groups that I was involved with had women's groups, and that's what opened my eyes. I said, "I think I need to get involved here."

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FAITH RINGGOLD:
So I was in the beginning of the women's art movement because women weren't included either. So this way, when I'm struggling to open up the museums for African Americans, it can be for African American women, too. Because I have two issues, the African American and the women, and so that was my entree. However, I also knew Florence Kennedy, the lawyer. She was a very good friend of mine. I went to school with her sister and she was involved with NOW. She was one of the people that started NOW. As a matter of fact, that first show that I had in 1967, she came and she brought Florence Kennedy, Gloria Steinem, and the one who originated NOW. Betty Friedan. How's that?

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FAITH RINGGOLD:
Yeah. They came. And that was very exciting. But at that particular time, 1967, I didn't see a need to become a feminist. I didn't understand it completely until they made it clear to me, "You are effective, but you will not

be involved. The museum will open up to African American artists, but you won't be one of them because you're a woman." Okay. I got it.

BETSY WEST:
I want you to tell me about some of the actions or the big actions that happened in the attempt to get more openness for women artists.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:
The Whitney Museum in 1970, they had biennials there, and a biennial happens every other year. They had very few women in any of them. The last one that they had, I believe it was like 2%, two women in there. And so we got together, Lucy Lippard and several other women got together to pass out flyers to make the people who came to the Whitney Museum aware that so few women are shown at the Whitney and so few women are involved in the Whitney biennial, and that this had to change. And we were able to open it up to, I think, 20% or 30%. Yeah. This was good. And I particularly… See, the Whitney showed mostly abstract artists, and so I wanted...

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FAITH RINGGOLD:
In those days, we used to do something called… We used to have non-negotiable terms. "This is non-negotiable. You can't negotiate with us on this. We must get X." And so I said, "Because there are so few African American women who are sculptors," because every other year would be a sculpture biennial or a painting biennial, "...So few African American women sculptors, that I'm going to select two African American women sculptures and their participation in the biennial is non-negotiable." And I did and they

were both in the biennial, and they were… they were Barbara Chase-Riboud and… Was it Betye Saar? Two wonderful African American women sculptors.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

And they were both in the show and it made me feel really good that I was able to get those two women. That had never, ever happened before. That was just brand new. Aside from that, there were several other women of other nationalities who were in that show. And so we continued on to do things like that and to open up for women and it gave me a much better feeling of accomplishment and that I was making a contribution that was meaningful. You see? And that's why I became a feminist because it made sense to me that you have to work for the changes that you want made. You can't just sit there and wait for somebody to deliver it to you because sometimes people are not interested in delivering things past themselves.

BETSY WEST:

I want to get you to talk a little bit more specifically about some of the actions because I did read your wonderful memoir, *We Flew Over the Bridge*.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

Did you? At the Whitney, we did a lot of things. We demonstrated outside and then we also went inside. And we would… We had eggs and we'd put "50%" on the eggs, we'd paint "50%" on the eggs because our demand was that the Whitney annuals should be 50% women. Now, this was outrageous because, I mean, that thing was no women. So now you're talking 50% women? Yes, 50% women. And we put the egg, put the 50% women on it. I made my eggs. I

boiled my eggs because I didn't… I mean, I had heard that there were several guys who had picked these eggs up. They were deposited around in the bathrooms, in different places at the Whitney and some guys had picked them up and they weren't cooked, so they would have egg all over their clothes and so on. I mean, there was a lot of stuff going on at that Whitney.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

But I boiled mine and painted them black and put 50% in gold on mine. I have one of them even today. We also gathered inside the Whitney at some point, and people were very, very interested in our demonstrations because they had heard about a demonstration, but they'd never seen one, they'd never participated in one. So at the museum, they could actually participate in this. They could sit around in a group and then we could walk around and say, "50% women, 50% women," and we'd blow our whistles. We had police whistles that we blew. Now, how we got to this 50% is that in those days, when you made a demand, you had to give a percentage or an amount or make it specific. Okay? And so I'm talking about the flyers that we are going to…

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

I'm making a flyer for us to pass out and placards for us to hold while we are demonstrating at the Whitney. So we had not discussed what percentage or exactly how many we were going to demand that the Whitney should have, how many women. So my daughter, Michelle Wallace, who wrote *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, she was… 70. She was born in '52, so what is she? 17 or something like that. So she's a kid. I think she was going to

college, though, and she was doing her homework, and I said to Michelle, I said, "What percentage of women do we demand?" And she said "50%." And I said, "Oh my god, this poor kid. She's too young to be involved in all this. We can't demand 50%." This is before I started saying 50%. It was her who started that 50%.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:
And I said, "Really?" I said, "What? Say it again." She said "50% women. That's what you want. You want 50% of the people in the biennial to be women." I said, "That's a lot, isn't it?" But I can't let her be more forceful than me, so if she says 50%, it's got to be 50%. And she said, "And 25% of them have to be students." I said, "Oh my god, this poor kid," because everything was about students. And it was a whole other time. It was a very interesting time.

BETSY WEST:
And how did it feel to be outside this great museum and inside sometimes painting eggs and blowing whistles? And tell me what it was like inside.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:
It felt very powerful. It felt like we were doing something that was…needed to be done, definitely something that had never been done before. And we were a part of the movement in America to equalize things because every group in our society was finding a cause and advancing the cause. We even had something called the Gray Panthers for old people. So it was a…this was a period when every day something fantastic happened that had never

happened before. Zip codes and area codes on the telephone, you know, all that happened in the '60s. Amazing time. And we were part of it.

BETSY WEST:
And how did it work out, the demonstrations at the Whitney for women's...

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FAITH RINGGOLD:
We got 20 or 22%. I'm not sure. It says in my autobiography. However, that wasn't 50, it wasn't Michelle's 50, but it also wasn't one or none. We were very excited about it because you always ask for more than you're going to get. Don't calm it down because they'll calm it down even more and you get nothing. So we did good. We did very good. And we were very excited about it and we kept moving, doing different things.

BETSY WEST:
I want to talk a little bit specifically about some of your artwork. Tell me a little bit about it and what it means and what it's trying to convey. So I'll start with the Woman on a Bridge series.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:
Woman on a Bridge series really began with a painting I did of Sonny Rollins, the jazz saxophonist. We grew up together on Edgecombe Avenue on Sugar Hill. A lot of famous musicians and artists lived in that area. And Sonny Rollins and I grew up together. He became a very famous jazz saxophonist and still today. When he would come up, when we were 12 and 13 years old, 12 years old, he would come up to my house and he would bring his

saxophone and he would blow it off key, and my mother would say, "Oh Sonny, please, you're disturbing my neighbors." And he would go home and his mother would say the same thing, "Oh Sonny, you're disturbing my neighbors." So where is this kid going to blow this horn?

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

So he used to go up on the bridge and blow his horn. Nobody can say anything up there, right? So I did this painting of Sonny Rollins blowing his horn on the Brooklyn Bridge in 1980-something. And when I did that, it occurred to me this was…this business of feeling the freedom to create on a bridge speaks to women in quilts because quilting is also a women's art. "I think I need to do a series called the Woman on a Bridge series." And I concluded that from doing that quilt…painted quilt of Sonny Rollins. And the first one was Tar Beach. And I did five of them and they were all women on a bridge doing various different invigorating and freeing activities like flying.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

It's a kind of freedom that women have been denied and will be denied if they are not on the case. It's not as if you get your freedom and then you got it forever. No. You have to stay on it because it can roll backwards as well. So flying has to do with that… giving you that inner feeling of freedom. And the first one that I did actually was Sonny standing on the bridge, but I realized that this is women. That's what women have. They have this inner ability to feel freer than they actually are, and they have to have it because you have to give yourself something. And so I think in a lot of ways we do that. Tar Beach has to do with going up on the roof in Harlem in the summertime to stay cool.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

Nobody had air conditioning, not in Harlem, not in anywhere else. So in the daytime, we might go on the fire escape, but at night, we went on the tar paper roof. And you had to wait until evening so that, you know, the tar paper wouldn't be sticky, and families would go up there. And so I wrote this whole story about that, and it became a children's book. The reason why I started writing on my art is because I had written my autobiography. In 1976, I went to Africa for the first time, Nigeria and Ghana. And I had such a fantastic experience in Africa that I said, "You know, you should write your autobiography. You can't sit around waiting for somebody else to say who you are. You need to write it and paint it and do it."

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

Florence Kennedy, actually she is the one that really inspired me to write my autobiography because I had said to her, "You know, Florence, we read all these women's books, we read everything they write and they never write anything about us. You know, if we ask them anything about writers, they know all the women writers, they know the women musicians, they know the women in fields of science and so on, but when you say art, they start talking about Picasso and Matisse. What the hell is that? How come they don't write about us?" Florence Kennedy said to me, she thought about it a little while and then she said, "You write about your damn self." And I said, "Oh my god, how cruel."

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

But she was a very outspoken woman. And I just thought, "Oh my god, I've got to take this and turn it into something good because that's what I have to do. All this negativity, I've got to turn it into something positive. All right now, you know what? She's making sense. Why should I sit here and wait for somebody else, some woman to write about me? Write about my damn self. Okay. I will." And then I went to Africa, came back, and I began writing my autobiography. Couldn't get it published. From '76 to '80, I wrote on it. Finished it in '80. Thought I had an agent. The agent turned me down. She was a really good agent. And I thought, "Oh my god, I'm so lucky. I'm going to get published." But when she read it, she didn't think that it was something that people wanted to read, that one that you read.

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FAITH RINGGOLD:

It didn't have the story that she thought was appropriate for an African American woman. I hadn't been tortured and thrown out the window and raped and beat up. All those things hadn't happened to me. I was telling a story about— a fairly positive story and it just didn't have those things in it that a lot of African American women had in their stories at that time. I was very annoyed that somebody would try to tell me what my story is. How dare anybody tell me what my story is? So I said, "Now, I have got to find a way to get my story out there past these people who want to deny me. I know what I'll do. I'll write it on my art." And that's when I started making quilts and writing my story on the quilt.

00:44:14:00

FAITH RINGGOLD:

As I get the art photographed, the story's photographed with it, it's out there. Without editing, without an agent, without a publisher, I got it. And that's how I got my first children's book actually published because the dealer that I had at the time, Bernice Steinbaum, she photographed Tar Beach, the painted story quilt, made it into a poster, a huge poster, and distributed them. And Andrea Cascardi who was a editor at Random House, read the story Tar Beach and called me on the phone and said, "I love this story. I'd like to make a children's book." She said, "Would you like to do that?" And I said, "Yeah, but I didn't know it was a children's… I didn't know it was a children's story."

00:45:18:00

FAITH RINGGOLD:

I thought because everybody else had said, "Oh, these are art books and art books don't sell" and da di da. So I said, "Sure. I would love it." And that's how I got my first children's book because I was writing on my art, couldn't get my autobiography published, and I just decided when somebody says you can't do something, do more of it. Accelerate. That's the way you get it done. Instead of stopping, which is what they want you to do, accelerate. Do more. And so it worked. It worked for me. And I just… and after with Andrea, when I did Tar Beach, she said, "What about Harriet Tubman?" And it just kept going on. And Simon and another one of my editors there, they just kept at it and I just kept...

00:46:14:00

FAITH RINGGOLD:

And I also believe that you never ever turn your back on an opportunity. You get an opportunity, you do it. I didn't know about this children's book thing. I really didn't know I could write a children's book. I didn't know that Tar

Beach was a children's story, and not one word was changed. I had no idea I was writing a children's story. All I knew was that my daughter was a brilliant writer and she had told me "Now, if you are going to write, you should have a vision." No, not a vision, "a voice." The vision is for the artist. Now, I had been told about the vision. I said, "Oh, I know." I know I have to have a vision because artists have to have a vision, but now I have to have a voice too. Okay. A voice and a vision. All right. Okay. I got it. So I was developing my voice as a writer. I put myself back into my childhood when I was growing up on Tar Beach with my family, my mother, my father, and my brother and sister. I said, "Yeah, that works. That's good."

BETSY WEST:
Say a little bit more about quilting and what… Just tell me that you started it and kind of...

00:47:31:00

FAITH RINGGOLD:
Okay. Now, the women's movement, the women's art movement. Now, the women's movement was not over, but the women's art movement began late '60s, went to about 1972, 3, and then kind of faded away. A lot of women artists were not in the galleries. They demonstrated. They got their work into galleries. They were now accepted in many of the galleries. I was not because I was not abstract. Mostly all of them were. I finally found a gallery for myself, the late '60s, but then my gallery went out of business, and so now we're into the mid-'70s and I'm still working very hard, but I have nowhere to show my work. My work is very political, as you can see. Okay. So now what am I going

to do? Some women stopped working. I was determined. I will not stop working. I must continue.

00:48:35:00

FAITH RINGGOLD:

And so I quit my job teaching so that I could lecture and travel around the country having shows because colleges and universities had galleries and museums and not a lot of access to art to show in them. Everybody was involved in some sort of political something, and colleges and universities hired political speakers to come and speak. Florence Kennedy had an agent and she offered her agent to me and he would schedule me places to go all over the country. And I could go… I could have shows there if my art could travel. That's how I began making quilts out of my paintings because they could be rolled up, folded, put in a trunk, shipped all over the country for very little money. And I was able to quit my job. Well, I had also gotten married again, so that helped me quit my job.

BETSY WEST:

Okay. I want to ask you about a couple more works of art. One that I particularly loved and I want you to explain to me what it's all about and start by saying the name is Picnic at Giverny. I'm not sure if I'm saying the name right.

00:49:56:00

FAITH RINGGOLD:

Picnic at Giverny is one of the French collections I did. In 1990, I went to France to work on the French collection. As a college student, I learned about… Of course, studying art I learned about all the European artists and

then the American artists began in the '40s when the European artists came from Europe to America. Then the center of the art world became America and not Europe. I had all of this knowledge and information. I didn't know anything about African American artists in the '40s when I was in college, even though they were living all around me. Isn't that something? Living all around me. They weren't in the museums. They weren't in the books. My teachers didn't know about them, didn't teach about them, and these guys were all living all around me. Amazing.

00:50:59:00

FAITH RINGGOLD:

I had all of this knowledge about these European artists, and the difficult thing is when you teach people about something that doesn't have a lot to do with them, sometimes they never get to themselves. So after we all graduated from college, we had to find a way to find ourselves, and I had to do that also. So I had to find what is African American art? Where is my art? Okay? Obviously I'm not European. And so I had done that. By 1990 I had done that. So I went to Europe to… This was my second or third time going there. But the idea now was to pay tribute to these European artists who had nourished me before I knew who I was. And now that I knew who I was, I could do it.

00:51:50:00

FAITH RINGGOLD:

So I made up this story about this African American woman who goes to Paris in the 1920s to be an artist because she can't do it in America because of racism and so on. And that's the whole story about the French collection. I went to Giverny. I visited Monet's house in Giverny and I made a painting of all of these women who had been important in my life as an artist. I was

giving tribute to all these people who I've met. I think my daughter is on that painting. I can't see it right now because I've done a lot of paintings, as you might know. But yeah, it was a tribute painting to the artists who had nourished me as a young artist.

BETSY WEST:
Okay. Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?

00:52:46:00

FAITH RINGGOLD:
Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima? was my first story quilt. Now, I told you I started writing these stories because I was told that my autobiography was not really worth publishing and that I should rewrite it. And I was determined that I would not do that, that I would become even more of a writer than I had before, so that I would tell my story not only with images, but I would also tell it with stories. And the first one I did was Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima? So I rewrote Aunt Jemima's whole story. You know, Aunt Jemima is this person on a pancake box who makes pancakes and she doesn't… But she doesn't really do anything. I just made Aunt Jemima all the way over, that she becomes an entrepreneur and she's just fabulous in my story.

00:53:47:00

FAITH RINGGOLD:
That's the power of being an artist and being able to write and put it all together. And I just kept doing that until finally in 1995, I got my autobiography published the first time by Little Brown. So if you persevere, you just have to keep trying, just keep at it. That's what I did and it has

worked for me. Well, there are some things I'm still at it now, but, you know, it's slow, but it's coming, like galleries, an African American gallery and major museums where you can go and see the work of African Americans instead of just hoping that in the American Art Gallery, there'll be one African American shown. It's dubious. It doesn't happen. A lot of times they're in a collection, but you never see them in the museum. There should be this gallery. Could be a court, could be a wing, whatever. It's what we were struggling for in the late '60s and '70s and it never happened. It's never happened. It needs to happen.

BETSY WEST:
I want to ask you a little bit about the women's movement. When you first saw the women's libbers, as we called them at the time, on television, talk a little bit about that and what was your opinion of that.

00:55:13:00

FAITH RINGGOLD:
I did not understand the women's movement until it touched me personally because that's what any movement has to do. It has to touch you personally in a way that you can't deny. And that happened to me. And I think as it happens to other women, they'll understand it.

BETSY WEST:
Any recollection of Roe vs. Wade?

00:55:44:00

FAITH RINGGOLD:
Well, yeah. I tell you, as a child, I recall women didn't have more than one or two children, so there was a Roe vs. Wade going on in another kind of way in

the '30s and '40s. Some people died because they would go to people who weren't doctors. But the doctor who would perform abortions was prevalent in the '30s and '40s. I knew that. So I've always been for… That aspect of the women's movement was no problem with me because I knew that women had to find a way. When I had my second daughter, I had two daughters in one year. 1952 was a hell of a year. January, I had Barbara. December, I had Michelle.

00:56:46:00

FAITH RINGGOLD:

Don't ask me what we were thinking. I did not… It didn't occur to us that we were going to get pregnant if we didn't have some kind of prevention because there wasn't any. There really wasn't any. When I got pregnant… Actually, when I had Barbara, but before I left the hospital… I mean, when I had Michelle. The nurse said to me, "She's very smart. She's very spoiled," talking about Michelle. "When you get home, give her some pablum and do the best you can because you've got something on your hands here." And she said, "And I'll see you before the year is out." And that was January. Michelle was born January 4th. "I'll see you before the year is out." And I said, "This woman is crazy. She's not going to ever see me again," because I had natural childbirth, and that was very new. No anesthesia. Just breathing.

00:57:47:00

FAITH RINGGOLD:

I'll never go through that again. December 15th, I was back there having Barbara and I told the doctor, I said, "The nurse told me she'd seen me before the year is out. I couldn't figure out what the heck is she talking about." I said, "Now, you've got to give me some kind of prevention. I mean, you've got to

give me something." And he said, "No, I can't." He said, "I have to ask your husband. If I do, I have to ask your husband." I said, "But he's not going to be pregnant. Me. I'm the one who is going to be pregnant. I mean, I object to you even saying. I'm sure he would agree, but I mean, no. If you don't give me something, I am going to have an abortion because I have connections. I can do that. I can have a safe abortion." And he gave me a diaphragm, I think. I mean, even that was illegal then. Can you imagine? I never went back again. I mean I had…Two kids was fine. No more.

BETSY WEST:
Okay. How about the Clarence Thomas Anita Hill hearing?

FAITH RINGGOLD:
Oh my God.

BETSY WEST:
What was your reaction to that?

00:59:05:00

FAITH RINGGOLD:
Well, Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill. Clarence Thomas was just… Well, he's still there, isn't he? Supreme Court. I lived right up the street from Thurgood Marshall, who also was a Supreme Court, so I was… I mean, I used to see him all the time walking up and down the street. So I grew up looking at Thurgood Marshall. So this guy, I don't know. I don't know what to say about him or… Anita Hill I thought was very brave and still is today. It was interesting how he managed to get over it, even though he was obviously

not… What should I say? Not somebody I would want to see on the Supreme Court. But I guess you have to have all different kinds, all different stripes, right? This is America. Everybody is supposed to have their voice.

BETSY WEST:
Let's see. What's the most meaningful piece of advice you've ever gotten?

01:00:15:00

FAITH RINGGOLD:
Write about your damn self.

BETSY WEST:
See? See how easy that is?

FAITH RINGGOLD:
Florence Kennedy really… She did it.

BETSY WEST:
What's the one piece of advice you'd give to a young woman about balancing work and family?

01:00:30:00

FAITH RINGGOLD:
Oh my goodness. That is so hard to do. I think that one should have their children when they are fairly young in their twenties. I don't approve of waiting until you're in your thirties to have children because then you're going to… Because some things you just can't do as long as the children are little. So if they're little when you are young… I don't think before 20 you

should have children. I don't think teenagers should have kids. They're not mature enough. So, in the twenties is fine, I think, because then you're young, they're young, and you can kind of work real hard and it doesn't… It's okay. It works for you. But don't wait too late to have them because they take a lot out of you and you've got to give him everything you've got because they deserve it. And don't bring them here if you can't do that, please.

BETSY WEST:
What did you want to be when you grew up?

01:01:34:00

FAITH RINGGOLD:
Well, see, I was telling you. I had no idea about being anything. Doing. I liked to do art. Being. I hadn't really thought about being until I graduated from high school and they asked me what did I want to major in, in college. Then it became clear to me I had to be an artist.

BETSY WEST:
What's the accomplishment you're most proud of?

FAITH RINGGOLD:
That I have survived this venture, that I was able to quit my job at 42 and become a full-time artist. I think that's good. I like it.

BETSY WEST:
What was your very first paying job?

01:02:28:00

FAITH RINGGOLD:

Teaching. I got a high school art license and I went and taught in the public schools for 18 and a half years. And like I told you, I quit when I was 42.

BETSY WEST:

Which three adjectives describe you best?

FAITH RINGGOLD:

Oh my goodness. Now, that's hard because I obviously think a lot of myself. But I don't know what to say. I mean, I do know what to say, but I don't want to say it. I mean, I don't know. I'm kind of speechless. I wrote down a whole lot of words, but then I said just… Because I believe in being humble to some extent, but at the same time, not too humble.

01:03:22:00

FAITH RINGGOLD:

I'm productive. I'm accomplished. I'm strong and generous. I believe in giving back as much as… I have a foundation designed to preserve the legacy of African American artists and we have given awards to many art historians and lifetime achievement awards to African American women who would never get it otherwise, who have done fantastic things for others and themselves. Yeah, I believe in giving back and being as generous as possible.

BETSY WEST:

What person that you've never met has had the biggest influence on you?

01:04:17:00

FAITH RINGGOLD:

Well, when I think about that one, I have to say James Baldwin. He definitely shows up in my work. In the beginning when I was coming out of all that training of European artists and trying to find out who I am, I did my American People series, the struggle of Black and white. It was James Baldwin's books that I read who made those points to me. Yeah. And I never met… He lived in Harlem too right near me and I never met him. And then I went to Europe and he just died. I went looking for him in the south of France and he had just passed away, so I never got him.

BETSY WEST:
Another historic figure that I just wanted to get your recollections about and how much her accomplishments meant to you. Shirley Chisholm.

01:05:21:00

FAITH RINGGOLD:
Shirley Chisholm. I did a series on Shirley Chisholm, which I'll show to you. In 1972, she ran for president of the United States and I was making a series called Political Landscapes. In other words, I was trying to define the landscape as being political because we come out of it and we get buried into it and we live on it, and so there's a political aspect of the landscape. And I had been taught about all of these European artists who did beautiful landscapes, right? Monet and so on. And so I wanted to politicize the landscape in my Political Landscapes. And I did a series of eight paintings called “So Help Us Shirley,” and they were all about ending the war in Vietnam, and poverty, and the landscape and not abusing the landscape and so on. This whole series was applauding and in tribute to Shirley Chisholm. So she's definitely been one of my favorite people.

BETSY WEST:

Can you say a little bit about this issue that's such a big deal lately in the women's movement about younger women versus more mature women? Do you think the groups understand each other? What don't younger women understand about their fore mothers and vice versa?

01:06:58:00

FAITH RINGGOLD:

That is a problem. When I said you will not understand a movement until it personally affects you, that's the problem with young women. I remember when I was young and I would go into a gallery to show my work. The gallery dealer would look at my legs, but not my art. When I got older, he wouldn't look at the art or the legs. That's going to happen to them. As they get older, they will realize that first of all, they'll want more, they'll try to achieve more, and they'll get less without a lot of energy. When you are young, there's the smile and all of that and everything is nice. But as you get older, the reality sets in. So I think it is just in every generation, the young women are going to feel like, "What are you complaining about? Everything is wonderful. We're getting everything we want."

01:07:58:00

FAITH RINGGOLD:

Well, you don't want that much, for one thing, because you're too young to know what to want. And second of all, just wait till you get a little older. Get to be 30 at least and then we'll talk.

BETSY WEST:

I just wanted you to go back to your quilting for a little bit. Can you talk about why quilting in particular in the African American community has had such significant importance, maybe back to slavery? So I was just hoping you could talk about quilting in the context of the African American community.

01:08:27:00

FAITH RINGGOLD:

Slaves could use their ability to make quilts, to make… And their quilts were mostly appliqued, which means images that are stitched on top of other pieces of cloth, because they were needed as warmth, as blankets to keep warmth for the slave master and for the other slaves. But it was an art form and it was a communal art form because they could do it together. It just fit in beautifully and it didn't have to be stopped like the mask making or the carving and so on did. "You can't have slaves sitting around carving masks to do religious ceremonies. That's no good." Okay? But the quilts were fine because they were useful, useful and beautiful.

01:09:24:00

FAITH RINGGOLD:

For me, it was wonderful because it didn't have weight, and the weight is a problem when you're shipping shows. Heavy paintings on stretcher bars… because my quilts are paintings and the only difference in my quilts and my paintings is that they are not… the quilts are not on stretcher bars. They are now made into quilts, so they can be rolled up and folded and they don't have any weight. So it makes it easier for me to make a whole 30 piece show and ship it all over the country. And I didn't have to stop working because New York galleries didn't want to show my work. I could show my work on college

campuses in… in galleries and museums on college campuses all over the country. And talk, too and make money, and quit my job as a teacher.

END TC: 01:10:32