

# **ISRAEL McCLOUD**

Artist - Houston, TX

[www.israelmccloudstudio.com](http://www.israelmccloudstudio.com)

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**Amy Evans** [00:02]: Okay. I am recording. I'm with Mr. Israel McCloud, do I have your permission to record, sir?

**Israel McCloud** [00:11]: Yes, you do.

**AE** [00:12]: Thank you. This is Amy Evans on August 3, 2020. I'm at home in Houston interviewing Mr. McCloud over Zoom [an online video conferencing service], which is the technology of choice, but also a bit frustrating today. He's on an audio call, and we are here to talk about black-owned businesses in the era of coronavirus and being in Houston, and how the world has changed, and talking to creative people about the work they do and how they have pivoted during this moment. Mr. McCloud, if I could ask you please to share your name and describe what it is that you do.

**IM** [00:52]: My name is Israel McCloud. I am, for the sake of categorization, an interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary visual performing literary artist. Working artist, meat-and-potatoes artist. I move in and out of many different genres, and at the end of the day, I create for a living.

**AE** [01:20]: Wonderful, thank you. Now, could I ask you to share your date of birth for the record, please?

**IM** [01:25]: My date of birth, when dinosaurs roamed the earth, July 20, 1959.

**AE** [01:31]: Okay, thank you so much. I'm really interested in speaking with you from a cultural studies point of view, history point of view, but also as a fellow artist. I know, first of all, creative people wear multiple hats and that we always have creative solutions to things. I really

appreciate that about who you are and what you do. As far as your personal background, tell me about being a third-generation artist from the Third Ward [neighborhood] in Houston.

**IM** [02:05]: Well, I have been doing this for so very long, and one of the questions people ask me quite regularly and repetitively, more or less, is when or why did I become an artist? The response is always the same. I did not become an artist. Art became me, more or less, for the lack of a pun. I grew up in a very artistic household. My father was himself an artist, his mother was an artist—very creative and very adept in terms of ingenuity, working with your hands and improvisational skills from carpentry, painting, you name it. This has always been a part of my identity and my culture, and the core of my being, who I am as an individual and a person.

**AE** [03:01]: Has everybody in your family—is everyone self-taught?

**IM** [03:05]: Yes. Yes, this is something that, as they say, is in the blood. I come from what I like to say is a legacy. My entire family are artists. My children are artists, my grandchildren are artists. Even my great-grandchildren, and when I say they are artists, I mean, they have the gift. They have that ability to express themselves and to articulate their imagination via those mechanisms of drawing and painting and sketching. In some cases, depending on how animated they choose to be, particularly my grandchildren, singing and dancing and performance art as well, so, yes. My entire family is artistic.

**AE** [03:52]: Will you speak for a minute to how that makes you feel, to have the legacy continue?

**IM** [03:59]: I'm sorry?

**AE** [04:00]: I said, will you describe for a minute how that makes you feel, to have so many of your children and grandchildren continue the legacy of art-making?

**IM** [04:11]: Well, on the one hand, I'm excited about that in terms of the possibility of continuity of it all. On the other hand, I'm a realist, and as generations go, as life goes, nothing repeats itself. My upbringing as a young boy, myself and my brother, I have one brother who is an artist as well, was very, very intimate. By that I mean, my father took us under his wings at a very, very early age, and by that I mean as early as seven, eight, nine years old. Although I don't like to sound conceited in that respect but, for lack of a better definition, we were prodigies. He recognized the ability at a very, very early age, and subsequently he began to hone that and to cultivate it very assertively and from a very disciplinary kind of mode. We grew up with that, and that was something that was very much a part of my life. When my peers and my childhood friends were playing ball and doing the things that children do at that age, I was painting and being taught the ins and outs of color blending, and design, and all those dynamics. All those important aspects of being a better artist and so, that was something that was ongoing.

**IM** [05:51]: I share that story with you because my daughters, for example, they are very good artists. One, in particular [Ayanna Jolivet McCloud], attended Chicago Art Institute, and traveled abroad, and was also active in art in New York City, but she does not do this for a living. When you don't do something consistently for a living—when it's not your meat and potatoes—then it's very easy for it to be sidelined and almost like a hobby, if you will. You don't grow it. And so to answer your question, I'm somewhat concerned about the continuance of it. I don't know. Someone said something very poignant to me a year or so ago. They said, "Every time someone

dies, it's like a library closes," and so that kind of stuck with me. When my father [George McCloud, Sr.] passed in [19]82, everything that he knew, everything that he was able to pass on continued, and continues to this day in myself and my brother. When I pass on my concern, my question is, who will continue this? Who will take up this brush, if you will, and continue this legacy in the very real and pragmatic way that I have, as a day- to-day means of livelihood? That is my concern, and at this point, I'm not sure how that will play out.

**AE [07:28]:** Have any of your grandchildren asked you to teach them or mentor them in their artistic endeavors, at all? **[Crosstalk 00:07:37]**

**IM [07:38]:** Yes, but certainly not—none of that is with the degree that I myself embodied it, and that's understandable. It would be unrealistic to assume that each generation has the same degree of fire and passion for any given thing, whatever that may be. It could be a family legacy. It could be something that is just—that defines that particular family but no, to be honest. Not in the very serious sense. I mean, I long for that. My childhood and my youth was one of painting side by side, my father and my brother [George McCloud, Jr.], and, on occasions, my uncles. It was very intense and very concentrated, and very impassioned sessions. To expect or assume that that's something that will repeat itself is not realistic, so. I basically just work with what is, and I support my children and my grandchildren. I encourage them, and I think the ultimate way of doing that is by my own life, my own example, and my own career. My hope is that they will see that, and that would be a means of inspiration and motivation for them that will go beyond the actual physicality of teaching them.

**AE** [08:58]: Yes, absolutely. That reminds me of the wonderful post you made on Instagram [[@israelmccloudstudio](#)] a couple days ago, that I actually just saw today, the “excerpt from the book *Black Collage: Growing Up in Art, a Day in the Life, 1972.*”

**IM** [09:11]: Yes, yes, yes.

**AE** [09:12]: Would you talk about where that came from? I just love the visual of you and your father in the driveway with jazz blaring and art everywhere.

**IM** [09:23]: Yeah, yeah. That was around the, yeah, I think [19]72. That was a time where black enterprise was very, very real. Very real and practical in terms of African Americans understanding that in terms of controlling their communities and controlling their economics, that it was critical for them to tap into their own resources and their own talents and skills. I do remember very vividly, growing up, this was an era when there were just so many black-owned businesses and enterprise. The laundromats and the corner stores and the record stores and churches, all these were black-owned, so this was something that was very impressionable to me as a young boy.

**IM** [10:16]: My father, who himself was not a—he was not an on-the-clock man, so to speak. Didn't work for anybody for any extended period of time, because again, he recognized what his strength was, and his strength was as a visual, working artist and that's exactly what he did. He also identified myself and my brother as his two primary employees, if you will—indentured servants. So he utilized us in a very realistic way. At the time, it seemed very difficult. I remember on occasions, my mom [[Myra McCloud](#)] would constantly be petitioning him, and his

name was George, George McCloud. She said, "George, let those boys in. Let them come in and let them get a break," but he was very firm. He was a disciplinarian, so he would push us in a very assembly-line type manner. Boot camp-ish, if you will, to paint and to create and to produce and to just learn the mechanics of being an artist.

**IM [11:24]:** It was something that was never really—there wasn't a great deal of romanticizing art for me in my upbringing and my conditioning. Art was a way of life. It was a livelihood. It was how I ate. It was how my father sustained his family, and so we approached it from that particular angle and in doing so, particularly in relation to that excerpt, we did live in a house that was right on the corner of Yellowstone and Tierwester in Houston, Texas—southeast Houston—and my father would paint. We would paint all through the week, and we would paint as soon as I returned home from school in the evenings, and we would produce works and original black art, and jazz-related things. There was nothing that we did not or could not create. Landscapes and seascapes and all these very beautiful images and subject matters, and on the weekends, we would set them up and we would have art shows in the yard and in the driveway. My father handmade all the easels, and I remember that for years, being the modus operandus.

**IM [12:32]:** It was my introduction to commerce and to interacting with the public, and being a—I don't particularly like the term commercial, but learning the commercialization and the relationship between art and profit, and creativity and income. It was a very beautiful and a very lucrative sort of transaction and exchange that I came to love and, to this day, I still very much connect those two components in what I think is one of the most realistic marriages that an artist can ever understand, is how one can take their gift and at the same time, practice that gift and cultivate it, but also live and to flourish from it economically.

**AE** [13:26]: Do you remember your first paying job that you did on your own?

**IM** [13:27]: I don't remember my first paint job. I do know that as a child, my father saw very, again, very early that I was gifted, and I used to do characters, animated characters. He would encourage me to do as many as I could, and he would take those and sell those to the local neighboring daycares and nursery schools. That was very encouraging for me. What I do remember that is very clear and vivid is my first painting that I sold, and I've told this story on a number of occasions because I even remember how much. To this day, people find it impossible to believe, but it was a painting of a little boy sitting on the stoop of a porch, and there was a dead bird at his feet. It was the boy's bird, someone had killed his bird. He had on a red and white striped shirt, tattered jeans, and there were tears in his eyes. Very powerful and expressive piece, and I came home from school and my father gave me, what was it? I think there was 800—no, there was 300 dollars. Yeah, he sold the painting for 800 dollars, and I think he gave me 300. It's been some time, but it was a ridiculously large amount of money for an eight-year-old, at the time. I can remember that, so yeah. That—I'm sorry?

**AE** [14:58]: I said, my goodness, eight years old.

**IM** [15:00]: Yeah. Yeah. I remember that, because I was in the third grade at the time, so yeah, I do remember that. Coming home from school, and him having that money for me. He was that type of man, he was very, very real in terms of wanting to motivate us, and to make the connection, "When you do this, this is the result of that, and when you don't do this, this is the result of that." That was a way of just crystallizing the importance of hard work and the importance of high workmanship in one's craft, because it was a very intensely detailed piece. I



remember that. Since I've actually, now that we're on the subject, since I—I'm ashamed to admit it, but I have not, it has not been that recent that I have been introduced to Instagram, thank you to my daughters [Catina, Ayanna, and Nia], but I am putting a call out. If anyone knows where that piece is, owns that piece, or even knows who owns it, I would love so much—because since I've been posting on Instagram, it's amazing. I've got people who have been reaching out to me with paintings that they have bought from decades ago, and it's a really, really beautiful and wonderful kind of reunion, to connect with pieces that you painted and created so many years ago and to know that people still cherish and have those pieces in their possession.

**AE [16:29]:** Wow. I did notice that you've only been on Instagram since April [2020], but listen, we're going to put the call out for that painting. What a miracle that would be.

**IM [16:38]:** Definitely, definitely.

**AE [16:39]:** Wow. Well, let's jump ahead and talk about Israel McCloud studio. When did you formulate your own business?

**IM [16:51]:** I have always, again, been very practical in terms of how I approach life and livelihood. Like my father, who himself did not woo nor cater to the establishment, and by that I mean, trying to be included in a gallery or anything of that nature. I'm not putting that down; I think that that's a very beautiful thing. But one has to know what their niche is. And because, again, that was my conditioning—was understanding the importance of independence—I've always operated within that kind of a dynamic. I've had art studios. I've opened my own gallery, for many years, throughout Houston. Even when I was living in Albuquerque, New Mexico, I've always just kind of operated outside of the establishment, so to speak. It's been partly by choice,

but primarily by just necessity. There have been many cases that, no sooner than—again, because I continue that same tradition of my father's: create, produce the work volume, and then sell the work and market the work. That has always worked for me. I was a very early parent, early on, and so that was another thing that necessitated the importance of me being able to make a living at what I do, so. That's always been a constant with me, is just creating my own venues and mechanisms of profit.

**AE** [18:34]: Mm-hmm [**affirmative**]. When you started doing the work professionally, and by that I mean just getting paid for it, were you collaborating with your father, or were you working independently?

**IM** [18:44]: I was with my father, most definitely. Again, and I emphasize, eight years old, selling artwork. I remember that. I remember dealing with customers. I remember people pulling up and asking, "How much is this? Will you take that? Can I give you a deposit on it? Can I put it in layaway?" I remember all these things very vividly and so, for me, that is a professional working artist. I've been doing this for a very, very, very long time in terms of engaging, interacting with the public and with the community and with the world at large as a client base, most definitely.

**AE** [19:24]: Sure. When and how did the sign-painting—how does that fold into it? With your collaboration with your father and in your work now?

**IM** [19:32]: My father was a sign painter. My father was a master craftsman. He used to build dance floors and bars for nightclubs. I remember, there was a franchise called The Sportsman's Lodge, which was very prominent, as far back as the [nineteen] forties and fifties. It was

something that continued through the sixties and the seventies, again, to kind of die out [in] the latter part of the seventies. These were after-hour bars that catered to adult entertainment, and my father would be commissioned on many occasions to do the murals and to build the bar, and to paint the sign. He was, as they say, a jack of all trades, and so I learned early on about lettering and about freelancing, and about proportions and balance, and how to do these things. He always used to emphasize, "Don't limit yourself. Don't just have one talent, one talent. Don't just be someone who just paints flowers, or someone who just creates a sculpture. Do your best to master all those genres, all those fields, so that you can continuously eat."

**AE** [20:52]: Absolutely. Are there businesses that you remember working on with your father that are still in existence in Houston?

**IM** [21:03]: There are some. It would require a bit of—certainly, it's almost like a treasure hunt. Many of the businesses are no more. Many of the establishments are long gone and, just like so many things, they vanish with time. It's unfortunate, and one of the most unfortunate, and for me is a travesty, is that I don't have any of my father's work. I don't have a single piece of his work. My father actually passed when I was no longer in Texas, I was living in New Mexico [in 1982], but I do remember returning to Houston and just wanting very much to reclaim some of his work. Again, he was such a very realistic kind of man's man, if you will, and he just did not put a lot of stock into holding onto art, or establishing a body of work. He painted it, he sold it, he created it, that was dinner for tonight, so. That was the reality, so no. **[22:17]** I don't know a lot of the establishments, again, particularly in Third Ward. Places like J. B.'s Entertainment Center [a club that booked many famous world-class entertainers that was owned by John Brady Coleman], and Miss Baker's Donuts on Almeda. I could go on and on. Just, all these places are

gone. LeBlanc's Sandwiches [LeBlanc's Sandwich Shoppe, 1978-1986, opened by Wilton Joseph LeBlanc], and they are no more. Even Black Heritage Gallery, one of my dearest friends, Robbie Lee, who was like the matriarch of black art in Houston for many, many years. That was one of the last signs I painted, on Almeda and Chartres. She's not there anymore, so—it's kind of like a treasure hunt, just trying to find—almost like trying to find my artwork from the past, so you can imagine trying to pinpoint and locate the businesses. Houston is really, really that type of a town. It's like, you sink or swim, particularly with restaurants and clubs. If they don't make the grade, then they're gone, and that was kind of a really interested dichotomy because the beauty of it was that people were willing to spend a lot of money for the gamble of success, only to be in existence for six months or a year, just depending on longevity based on the economic dynamics.

**AE** [23:33]: Yes. That's part of what—it might be a needle in the haystack, but with the archival part of what I'm trying to do is to find some images of street corners and businesses in the archives at the [African American Library at the]Gregory School that may have some bit of illustration of some of the work that you're speaking to. Did your father ever document his work? Did he ever take pictures, or—?

**IM** [24:00]: No. He [never] took pictures—and again, it's interesting because I came across one of his patrons and I was so excited, one day, Dr. Edith Irby Jones [1927-2019]. I don't know if you've heard of her or not, but she was one of the great African-American female doctors here in the city of Houston, and she did so much in terms of pioneering medicine in Houston, and contributing to the medical field worldwide. She was also a collector of my father's work, and I found out that she had one of his pieces on one occasion, when she was still practicing in the Third Ward area. I remember just pleading and imploring her to please let me just borrow it. She

said the most I could do was take a picture of it, and I inadvertently did not take a picture that particular day. My intention was to come back and, long story short, she has since passed, and now her daughter, I understand, is somewhat of the custodian of her estate, and she is inaccessible. So it's these type of little scenarios that prove to be very, very frustrating and ironic in themselves.

**AE** [25:18]: Yeah. Yeah, it makes your—your and your father's work so ephemeral, and that's kind of poetic in that way, but also, oh, to have a collection of images of all of that from all those decades of work.

**IM** [25:34]: Yes.

**AE** [25:36]: Jumping a little bit to the—a lot—to the present. You know, I wonder—or, since you've been your own business owner and freelancer, I wonder if you have encountered any hurdles along the way: access to funding, or loss of clientele due to gentrification, anything that has slowed you down over the years, or in a particular instance.

**IM** [26:10]: No, nothing has slowed me down other than just time and age itself, that whole process of—that's connected with metamorphosis because everything changes. It doesn't stay the same. I've never lent or given a lot of credibility, if you will, to adversarial dynamics. I'm a very, very positive person and by that, I'm highly motivated and have always been. I'm at the top of my game right now in terms of just my creativity, my desire to produce my passion. To answer that question just regarding just the external dynamics, I mean, gentrification has very long-reaching tentacles, and one of those, of course, is that when the neighborhood changes, then the residents change. The whole spectrum changes, and so people that were familiar with

you—[27:13] There's an old term that we used to call, back in the day, in the [nineteen] seventies, snapper. And a snapper was an artist who would load up his paint and his kit and go out in the morning, and he would hit every unlocked door on the block, on the avenue, within anywhere from a twenty-five to a fifty, 100-mile radius, snapping. By that I mean, just making cold calls. "Hi, how are you? My name is Israel McCloud. I was in the area. I noticed you have a blank wall on the side of your building. Are you interested in getting your name on there? Yea or nay?" If the response was in the positive, then many times you could make money right then and there. I cannot count the times that I have gone into establishments totally unknown, and left there with either a deposit or closing the job, doing it right then and there. This kind of conditioning, it can be very, very addictive, and so that has been the case for me for many, many years. [28:17] When you have a neighborhood that has changed and buildings that are torn down and replaced by something else, and there's a different entity, there's a different energy, there's a different even spirit, if you will, that permeates from that newness. They don't have that familiarity, not only with you as an individual but with the culture and with the mindset or with the energy of the community. Of course, that is something that impedes and impairs the artist and the freelancer and the independent businessman, in general, especially the one that makes his livelihood by that very kind of synergy, if you will—how they connect with those existing and pre-existing dynamics.

**AE** [29:04]: Yeah. I wonder, all of what you said made me think. If there was a switch that kind of changed things with you working as an artist, creating hand-painted pieces, and how technology went past that to billboards, printed signs, prefab things, and if there was a time when

you had to convince people that handmade was superior, or that collaborating with a human on it—an artistic investment—was superior, is superior.

**IM** [29:43]: Well, that's something that sells itself. I have never, nor do I to this day, pressure the public. You either are savvy enough to understand the differential between what is handmade, or as I like to say, humanufactured, and what is mass produced. There's a select kind of clientele. There's a select mindset and mentality that goes with that. I have clients that would have it no other way. They don't want vinyl. They don't want something that's silkscreen. They want the real deal, because they have that level of appreciation and gratitude for talent and skill. They don't want to divorce themselves from that, but this is a very select kind of clientele. The larger majority, of course, they want something that is spit-shined and polished, and I think the most important aspect of it, unfortunately, and the most ironic, is something that's cheap. It's very difficult for a person who does something by hand to compete with something that is done instantaneously by a machine or a computer, if you will, so therein, you can see the conflict.

**AE** [30:57]: Yeah, but I feel like in the past twenty years or so, there has been much more appreciation for craft, and things that have been made by hand. Have you seen that in your business, where people are reverting back to handmade works?

**IM** [31:15]: Yes and no. It certainly would never be as it was before. I think that—hats off to sites like Etsy and these different sites that allow and enable the working artist and craftsman to be able to facilitate their wares via that mechanism. By and large, I think that the vast majority of the public and people, they don't get it and they don't have that level of appreciation and gratitude for that. I think it's a niche. I think it's a dying craft, genre, what have you. There is

a—they have a saying that's what was will return or will be again. There's nothing new under the sun so, yeah. Everything comes full circle, but it doesn't come full circle as it did in the beginning, originally, and that would be foolish or unrealistic, to expect that, so. Art in general, being an artist, producing art, and the livelihood of art, it is a very select type of field. It's not something that is for the masses. It's something that is for honed and cultivated tastes, and a cultivated eye. Even a cultivated spirit and mindset. It's not something that the average Joe or the everyday person can really appreciate or puts a lot of energy into trying to appreciate it because it does not rank very high on the scale of necessity.

**AE** [32:56]: Mm-hmm [**affirmative**]. Speaking about the future of sign-painting and handmade work, it made me think about the contemporary sign-painting exhibit that was at the Houston Center for Contemporary Craft that you participated in [in the fall of 2017: “For Hire: Contemporary Sign Painting in America”].

**IM** [33: 12]: Yes. Yes.

**AE** [33:13]: What was that experience like? That was such an incredible show, my goodness.

**IM** [33:16]: It was a wonderful experience. If I may be frank, I was a little perturbed, because like so many things, and I don't know why this is the case, there was no inclusion of Houston sign-painters. I just happened to be a part of that via my reputation as a sign-painter. They needed a local sign-painter to paint the introductory wall, and so I was contacted to do that. But all the sign-painters were from out of town, and I just thought that that was something very kind of off-key, just in terms of how—I think any time you choose to highlight something in a particular city or locality, the most important thing is to include the people of that region, of that



particular area. I don't think that this case can be greater driven home than the show that's currently being exhibited at the Museum of Fine Arts [Houston]. I think it's entitled Soul of a Nation[: Art in the Age of Black Power], where there's—they have all this incredibly mind-boggling artwork of African American artists, but no local talents were considered or included. I think that is something that needs to be examined.

**AE** [34:41]: Yeah. I saw that exhibit at the Crystal Bridges Art Museum in Bentonville, Arkansas, last year. I haven't seen it at the MFA[H], but it's my understanding that Earlie Hundall has some photographs.

**IM** [34:53]: Okay, that's correct. Yeah, he did, yeah. You're right. Yeah, someone did inform me of that, so I do stand corrected. For example, I remember when Peter Marzio, the director [of MFAH], he was very aggressive in terms of keeping that connection and that liaison. I did a show there courtesy of that kind of vision. It was called “A Place for All People,” where the museum reached out to the African American community, specifically, a call for entries, and it's just—it was called “Call and Response,” I remember that. They had works from their permanent collection, and they called on local artists to respond to those works by creating something that was kind of a response to that traditional piece they had, and it was very beautiful, in how they did that. If we could get more of that, that would be wonderful. I'm not being a nay-sayer or complaining. I'm simply saying that I think it's important to understand that everywhere that you go, in terms of on the planet, there are highs and lows. There's a midpoint, and there are people doing that very thing that you are committed to and exploring. And I think that part of that challenge has to be to make that connection and to identify and to lift those people up.

**AE** [36:24]: Yeah. I mean, Houston is a city that—I feel like it always has to find outside validation [**Laughs**] for being the place that it is. It doesn't always—it's not always self-reflective in appreciating what is actually here. And in the elitist museum—those formal spaces—it's extra hard to look in a place like—

**IM** [36:54]: To get in, yeah.

**AE** [36:55]: Yeah, yeah. The people who navigate those spaces want to be told what to like, so it's a—

**IM** [37:02]: Right, right, right.

**AE** [37:04]: —vicious circle.

**IM** [37:04]: Yeah, and I think that's a good word you used, elitist, because it kind of takes me back to that question you asked initially about—that's kind of in relation to inclusion. If I may use the word, and I've used this word for years and I've heard a number of people use it, Houston is a very cliquy, it's a cliquy kind of city. There's a cliquy arts community. There's a cliquy African American arts community, and by that, I'm simply saying that it's important that we understand that at the end of the day, talent is talent. Skill is skill. Beauty is beauty, if you will, and if I find that beauty in an artist who is unlettered, or does not have formal education, myself as a collector of art, then I'm going to support that artist. People buy and support artists for different reasons, some because of the pedigree, some because of the reputation, some because they feel that it's a better investment in terms of just the market value or the integrity of the piece that they're buying. I don't know, but if that were the case for me or my father, from my past,

then we would have never eaten. I'm so thankful that the people of that era; that's not how they thought. They simply saw what they liked, they recognized it as something beautiful, and they had to have it, and they were willing to pay for it.

**AE [38:39]:** Right. I'm totally with you on all of that. Well, let's talk about some of your work, specifically. What is a piece that you would like to describe and explain to us right now?

**IM [38:54]:** Wow. Well, that's a difficult question, because I have hundreds, if not thousands, of pieces. You mean something I've done recently, or—?

**AE [39:04]:** Well, no, not something you've done recently. Maybe something that stands out, or something that you were especially proud of, or something that was a really unique interaction with the business or property owner where you did a sign or a mural? Something that stands out.

**IM [39:23]:** Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Everything I do, I mean, I do one hundred percent. I mean, I did a mural about a year ago, I had a very good friend of mine—many of my clients are my best friends, incidentally, and my father used to tell me that early on as a kid. He said, "Your best friends are those who spend money with you." I have a good friend of mine, Herschel Teper. He owns Silverlust Jewelry, right there on the Westheimer's curve [at 1338 Westheimer]. I did a mural there in the foyer and he loved it, but Herschel spent money with me twenty-five, thirty years ago when he had a jazz club called Dizzy's, and he bought a couple of major jazz pieces from me. A portrait of Dizzy Gillespie, John Coltrane. **[40:03]** The Trayvon Martin mural, right there at Alameda and Wheeler, I'm particularly connected with that piece. When Trayvon was murdered, I was adamant about finding a wall to just kind of, not only memorialize him, but to just pay honor and tribute to him and to create a visual mechanism by which people could just

kind of vent their frustrations and their emotion. I approached many different business owners, and most of them said no. Walter Strickland, a local businessman [who owns The Groovey Grill and Café 4212], told me, "Israel, go ahead. You can have that wall." It's only a silhouette. I mean, it's just something that I did not put a lot of expression into, but I simply had to do it. It's a very, very difficult [textured cinder block and mortar] surface. It's the same surface, actually, the same wall that I recently added George Floyd's portrait to, but I was just happy to get that. It has received literally worldwide recognition, in terms of just how people have responded and reacted to its presence. **[41:12]** I mean, I could go on and on and on. It's just things like this. Most recently, [Houston's] Station Museum commissioned me to do a mural, as well as some other artists, that's presently being exhibited. It's a portrayal of Dr. Martin Luther King, of course, and I put a twist on it. I've got an alien on it, if you will, and I've got a lot of different responses from that, in terms of feedback. What I wanted to do, and it's a satirical kind of touch. I wanted to take this thing and elevate it from a different view, if you will. How other beings, if you will, perceive us, so in doing that I've got this guy, kind of like the Star Trek. It's a pun where he is just kind of making this transmission to the headquarters, if you will, about what the status of life on Earth is, and he's just kind of focusing on all this civil unrest and racism and economic disparity, so.

**[42:22]** But it also, of course, addresses the issue of police brutality. All that is tied in with the theme, so it's a very powerful piece but also very illustrative and just kind of something that I wanted to jar the mind into the thinking of the people that viewed it, as well as their emotions, because I've got these—and it's a piece that I am growing. It's an organic piece, because it also lists the names of many different victims and individuals who have fallen to police brutality, and I continue to add those names. Some, as far back as the seventies: José Campos Torres [a twenty-three-year-old Mexican-American Vietnam veteran who was beaten to death by several

Houston Police Department officers in 1977], Ida Lee Delaney [a fifty-year-old African American grandmother who was gunned down while on her way to work by drunken, off-duty Houston Police Department officer Alex Gonzales in 1989], and as recently as now, with Tamir Rice [a twelve-year old African-American boy, was killed in Cleveland, Ohio, by twenty-six-year-old white police officer Timothy Loehmann in 2014], the young fifteen-year-old, and George Lucas—I mean, George Floyd [a forty-six-year-old African American man who grew up in Houston's Third Ward neighborhood and was killed in Minneapolis, Minnesota, during an arrest by white police officer, Derek Chauvin, who knelt on Floyd's neck for nearly eight minutes in 2020], of course, so. That's a piece that I am particularly proud of.

**AE** [43:13]: Is that a permanent piece at the Station Museum?

**IM** [43:16]: I was told that it was only going to be a matter of months. I've just been informed that it may be up for a year, so I'm not real sure what the duration of its exhibition is. The longer it's out there, the better, in my opinion.

**AE** [43:34]: Absolutely. May I ask if they commissioned it, or did they just give you the space to—

**IM** [43:39]: No, it was a commissioned piece, yeah, certainly.

**AE** [43:43]: Okay. That's the one that's entitled “Enough”?

**IM** [43:47]: Yes, yes. “Enough.”

**AE** [43:49]: Okay. It's a very intricate piece that—

**IM** [43:52]: Thank you. Much of my work is. I explore many different genres and many different painting styles. My childhood, my youth, was intensely detail-oriented. I mean, I was an incredibly dedicated realist for many, many years. I just, because of course when you're young, you're just so intense. When we're young, we're just incredibly intense. As we get older, we have less and less time, seemingly, to just dedicate or devote to any one train of thought. I have amazing dexterity when it comes to my style of expression and painting, from abstract to collage to realism to assemblage, you name it. I'm known for many different styles and perhaps this is something—I've heard in the past, people would say that—and I've never agreed with it—they say, "Oh, you've got to get one style, if you want to be famous, if you want to be successful." But that's like someone telling me, "Okay, well you've got to learn to walk with one foot, even though you have two." It's impossible. I have to employ all of the expressive energy and faculty that is in me because that's just who I am as a creative person.

**AE** [45:10]: Sure. And an artist should evolve. I mean, if they stay stagnant, well then, they won't be able to grow.

**IM** [45:18]: Right.

**AE** [45:19]: First of all, I want to pause, because we've been speaking for forty-five minutes, and I said I would need about that much of your time. But if you are not in a hurry to hang up, I wonder if we could stay in conversation a little bit longer?

**IM** [45:31]: Oh, what's a little bit longer?

**AE** [45:35]: Maybe fifteen minutes.

**IM** [45:39]: Let's see. Let's go for it. Yeah. All right.

**AE** [45:41]: Okay. I like that answer and attitude. Okay, so I want to go back to the Trayvon Martin and George Floyd murals that you did on Alameda at Wheeler. First, talk about—and even the Station Museum mural—about your art being a conduit for sociopolitical expression and getting things out and down on the public record in the form of a mural.

**IM** [46:12]: Well, your question is more or less what, the importance of it or —

**AE** [46:17]: Well, no, I know the importance of it. But I mean, for you—how you feel compelled to use your skill in that way.

**IM** [46:28]: Oh, I have no choice. I mean, again, I'm a very pragmatic person, so. Again, I learned early on to disconnect, if you will, from the romanticizing of things. For me, art is a mechanism for change, for identifying, and for identity. For the propagation of culture, and for the preservation of heritage and identity and all those things. It is the way by which we are able to articulate our emotions and our needs, and to examine things from a place or a plateau that is disconnected from the standard or the norms, if you will. I mean, because the beauty of art is its timelessness and its universality. Its ability to speak to all people and to speak to humanity. If you look at the particular piece called “Enough” at the Station Museum, people ask me, “Well, tell me about the box of [Crayola crayon-style] colors. What is that?” I say, “Well, it's self explanatory. You've got all these colors that can exist in a box and be united, but here it is us. We've just got this issue, this hang-up with pigment.” I painted on the box the word humanity, spelled H-U-E-M-A-N-I-T-Y, and so I am a real big strong and adamant proponent of humanity.

The respect for it and the importance of it and the recognition of it. **[48:19]** I'm a parent, and how can you be a parent and not connect with all things that are positive and progressive? Not only for you, but for the well-being of your children and your grandchildren, your family? I mean, on a sad note, in two more days it will mark the sixth anniversary of my son's [Malcolm McCloud's] murder. He was twenty-four years old, and he was killed. This is another statistic and—black on black crime. Even before I addressed the police brutality, blue on black, that was my concern, for, how do I speak to young African American brothers? How they have this flagrant attitude of dehumanizing each other via gang warfare and all these different mechanisms that do nothing but create voids and division in the community, and just in the neighborhood. **[49:25]** Yeah. I always look at ways to uplift and to inspire, and one of my vehicles over— really, one of my early-on slogans was, "Artist for hire," H-I-R-E, "Artist for higher," H-I-G-H-E-R. Real big on elevating people via the mechanisms of art, raising their consciousness, raising their humanity, and raising their sensitivity and their awareness of how we can make things better via this beautiful mechanism of art. It certainly goes beyond visual art. I'm talking literary, I'm talking performance, I'm talking music, all these things. Everything. There is an accountability that I feel, without getting preachy, but there's an accountability that I think rests very squarely on the shoulders of creative people, and their ability to speak and to touch the masses. It is critical that we recognize that and we use that for all things good that will motivate and elevate.

**AE [50:32]:** Yes, and I really appreciate your immediate response to that question was that you don't have a choice.

**IM [50:39]:** Right, that's it.



**AE** [50:42]: I feel like most change comes from the artist being brave enough to share and publicize and advertise.

**IM** [50:55]: Absolutely.

**AE** [50:56]: Yeah. The artists are the brave ones. If I may read some of your words back to you, this wonderful quote that I found in the *Houston Chronicle* article about the mini-murals that you did on Emancipation [Ave. in the Third Ward]? You said, "Artists have always been the mouthpieces to the people, and I don't think we should take that lightly."

**IM** [51:17]: Oh, yeah. I forgot about that.

**AE** [51:17]: That's a beautiful phrase, so thank you. Well, and I, just to kind of end on a couple notes. I want to ask you, it doesn't look like the [COVID-19] pandemic and the heat that is Houston in the summer has kept you from working. I think by my count, you've done three murals since April [2020]?

**IM** [51:42]: Right.

**AE** [51:42]: There might be more. I have the 2020 census mural at the S.H.A.P.E. Community Center, the Station Museum mural, and then the Lawndale mural.

**IM** [51:53]: Right.

**AE** [51:54]: You're a busy man.

**IM** [51:57]: I am, and—

**AE** [51:58]: You're wearing a bandana [over your mouth] during the summer in Houston [during COVID-19] in 2020. It's such a weird time.

**IM** [52:06]: Yeah. Well, there's work to do. I think that because we are physical people and we are really kind of governed by our ability to move and to be active, I just recognize the importance of action. That was my conditioning as a child, and as a young man, to do as much as you can. It's important for me to not look to the left or right, and to preoccupy myself with who else is doing what else, but to focus on what I can do and am able to get done in a twenty-four-hour period, in a forty-eight-hour period, in 365 days, in a lifetime. Once we are able to kind of zero in on that kind of focus, we'll find that we can get an incredibly large amount of things accomplished, so that is really what I am determined to do. I don't have the luxury or the blessing of my father being here anymore, and I mentioned that about my daughters. Not being a—I'm not a—I mean, all power to the feminine spirit, but my father, he kind of, he identified that, "Look, I've got boys and I'm going to milk that for all it's worth." He had us on ladders at a very young age, and doing very physical, male-oriented things. I'm comfortable with being on a scaffold today and being in an air-conditioned studio tomorrow and doing something incredible, of massive scale, and something intricately small, so— **[53:54]** I just think it's important for us to identify the opportunity and to make the most of it when it presents itself. Sometimes, to create the opportunity. I'm not one for waiting around for a gallery to pick me up, or somebody to acknowledge me. I just believe that we validate our own selves by the premise that the proof is in the pudding, and so I'm one of those people that just am determined to do as much as I can, while I can.

**AE** [54:24]: Yes, and here's to that. Is there anything that you haven't done yet that you want to do?

**IM** [54:33]: That's a good question. I really want to tap into more of the children's art. Since being a parent and a grandparent and a great-grandparent, if you will, I just find the spirit of children's art so incredibly enriching. The word I use—I had a conversation with a gentleman at the Station Museum—is pure. There's a beautiful purity in children, and how they create and how they see the world, and how they articulate that via the mechanism of art. I want to give them more venues and a much more accessible platform. The platform my father gave me was the world, the city. But for the children, the youth, I think if we could have more city-wide art-related events with strong sponsorship, or just pay more attention to them and what they're creating. Again, it's that brave and pure spirit that is able to create and to imagine, in times like this. Sometimes we underestimate that, surely, if all this toxicity is impacting us as adults the way it is, you can imagine what it's doing to the youth, who themselves are not that adept at how to express that level of confusion and uncertainty. **[56:06]** I think supporting them in a more concrete way and a more consistent way is important for me. But, at the end of the day, just to encourage and to raise the consciousness of the public in general to the importance of art, and supporting artists. I've long since—there was a point in my career where I would look at things and say, "This is good art, and this is bad art," but that came from my father's influence on me. I no longer do that. Just simply give the artist a canvas. Give them the means and opportunity to create and produce, and support them and see what happens.

**AE** [56:47]: Yes, and that's actually a beautiful note to end on, I think. I would like to ask you if you have anything that you would like to say that I wouldn't have known to ask you.

**IM** [57:00]: Good question. Wow. That I'm just getting started. **[Laughs]**

**AE** [57:16]: There we go; there we go. If I could ask you, just to close this out, if you would read that poem that I mentioned earlier, from the “Trace” exhibit [at the African American Library at the Gregory School in 2019]?

**IM** [57:28]: Yes.

**AE** [57:29]: If you have that in front of you, the poem.

**IM** [57:35]: Yes. That particular piece was in relation, of course, to many of the subjects that we've talked about. **[Reading]** Glancing back, yet striving forward. It is the evidence of things built, seen, and experienced that bear witness to the tenacity of our spirit, and commerce. Even and always against all odds, the testament of truth, the burden of proof is in the beauty of our resilience and continuity. Long after, the “yesterday” vanishes, without a trace.

**AE** [58:05]: That's beautiful. That's a perfect way to close our interview, even though we did not get to talk about Acadian Bakery or your van, or so many things. I hope that this interview is a first of many conversations we might have together, just as people in Houston. Because I just admire you and your work, and I've really enjoyed this conversation, and I cannot begin to thank you enough for your time, Mr. McCloud. Thank you so much.

**IM** [58:38]: Thank you Amy. You're more than welcome. I appreciate it.

**AE** [58:38]: Thank you.

**[END]**