

Art is All Around Us
Tape 12

Crew: Good. We'll start and stop with both buttons, okay?

I: Great. Floyd, if you could introduce yourself. Just state your name and the name of your piece.

FN: **12:00:53** Okay. My name is Floyd Newsum and my piece downtown is called The Planter and Stems.

I: Floyd, how did you find public art?

FN: **01:03** Well – you know – I mean, there could be several interpretations but my particular definition is that public art is an art that is in access to the public in a way where it is not inside buildings maybe or that it is in the parks or in areas where the public can freely have – you know – the ability to view it, to walk around it, to see it. **01:43** When art is in a museum, it's for the public but you'd have to go inside the institution when it's open or you have to pay ... you know, for public art is it's where it's free and accessible.

I: Why do you think public art is important?

FN: **02:02** I think it's important because our society has always had a need for art, and the impulse to create art and to be surrounded by it is something that has gone on for ages. **02:16** It's important because when people are in an environment and they have something around them that is esthetically pleasing, it is joyful, or it is playful, it may have a serious connotation, but it is there so that the public can be enlightened, and so it's important that we have art because it feeds the soul. **02:53** It gives an opportunity for you to react upon it.

I: Floyd, what do you think – That is a great response! Why do you think it's important specifically for Houston?

FN: **03:04** Well, public art is important for Houston because it's – first of all, it's the fourth largest city in the nation and if we were a city without public art, without the ability for its citizens and its tourists to come downtown or to the airport or to a park and not see something that is realistic or abstract or nonobjective, that is freestanding, that is a relief, that is not from nature but is made by an artist for the beautification of a specific site. **03:49** It's important for Houston to have this because when people come here, they come to see if Houston is a town that is or has an international flavor – okay- and international flavor means that it has things or objects that say we are able and we are responsible for the enlightenment to

give joy and to give some fulfillment to the soul, and the soul has – this role is so that people can be inspired or just to be intrigued.

I: What role does the public play in public art?

FN: **04:58** Well, there are quite a few roles that the public plays. They sometimes are on committees that help decide what kind of art will be placed in their community. **05:16** Sometimes public art is paid by tax dollars and a lot of times it's not. Sometimes it's a gift. Sometimes, a segment of the public will contribute money to build art. **05:33** So the public's role is – maybe – trifold. It is one who – sometimes – will cast judgment and decide if a piece should be installed or where its place be, that they are on a committee that is deciding about placement of art. **05:58** The public's role – sometimes a segment committee want art, and they actually put their own money to beautify an area. The public's role is to come out and enjoy art. **06:15** It does not mean that they enjoy every piece of art that they see or that they encounter, but within the masses – within that arena of the public – there are going to be some that will be overwhelmed with joy about a work of art and as an artist, you don't mind people when they don't like it because – I mean – it's about getting a reaction.

I: Great! Let's talk about Planter and Stem. How did you come up with the idea? What ... for?

FN: **06:56** Well, when competing for this commission, we – the artists that were involved with it – were presented with the history of downtown and the location of the Planter and Stems is where the old Lamar Hotel was, and it was a group called the group of eight – and that was Jesse H. Jones, the Abercrombie's, the Wortham's and others – that were instrumental before city council in developing the direction of Houston – how it was going to grow, what was going to be developed, what things were going to be done. And at the same time, with the historians talking about who these players were in the development of Houston. **07:46** I did some of my own research to find what group of people or what particular person – who was not a multimillionaire – was also involved as entrepreneur in the development of downtown, and I came up with some real interesting names like O.P. DeWalt, an African-American, Felix Tijerina, Hispanic, and Albert Finn, an Irishman, who were entrepreneurs but they weren't – you know – the big shots, but they were part of developing downtown. **08:27** And so that inspired me to create something that represented that those were the people who were the movers and shakers and then those small business people who also make the United States or the world – you know – turn – you know, I think small businesses have more than the large business you see and so I wanted

to make sure that whatever I put up there represented – you know – a broad segment of the community. **09:01** So that's what inspired me knowing that that area was an area of development. And the planter represents the group of eight – the people who were the multimillionaires – and then the stems represent the small entrepreneurs who were as vital and as important as the movers and shakers who were like Jesse H. Jones.

I: With somebody who has never seen the planter or the stems, can you describe what they are and what they look like?

FN: **09:37** Well, all of them are made out of stainless steel and were painted. A lot of times, you don't see a sculpture that is painted. I think that – I think my piece is the third piece that's downtown that has been – that's painted. **09:50** The Míro, the Duffet, and then there's my piece – and most pieces are – you know - metal works with little paint, and I have the intentions of making that very colorful 'cause I've always been known as the man of color, the guy who puts a lot of color in his paintings and things of that nature so the design has these wings to it, and it is kinda like a three-dimensional canvas for me because on each side, there are different designs. **10:26** Some of the designs are very abstract. No representation or have really no meaning in them, whimsical figures that I use and then there are other elements within the sculpture that symbolizes – you know – like the Pennzoil Building or the astrodome or water, but we have two major Bayous – the White Oak and the Buffalo Bayou downtown, and then there are symbols of streets and clouds and of course the sun 'cause this is – it's a very hot environment. **10:57** So I thought in terms of designing something that has some meaning. At the same time, one may not see anything other than design and color. **11:11** The stems – those little whimsical curves with yellow and black and sometimes colored tops. Those little yellow – I've heard that those little yellow things look like peanuts but they were sort of like my little seeds – you see – because they are shoots from the – from the – from the planter and – you know – it encompasses two blocks from my piece from Dallas to Lamar on Main and from McKinney to Walker on Main, and there are six stems. **11:49** Well actually right now, they're only five because a drunk driver ran over one, but it will be replaced at some point but the – the images came because of – you know – what that area was all about.

I: What kind of reactions have you heard from the piece?

FN: I think the best ...

I: [Inaudible] One second. [Pause] Okay. What kind of reactions have you heard from the piece?

FN: **12:28** I've had two real different reactions and – but they're both great. I'll share the story. One day, I went down to view the work during an early part of the day, and I was just sort of walking around looking at it – you know – and there was this lip prints. **12:48** Some woman had kissed and left her lip prints, and so I've photographed it to document it. Basically, if I ever told the story someone might say, "Yeah, he's lying." Well, I got it documented. but I think that was an expression of love – you know. **13:05** And then there was this guy who was looking at the work and then his reaction was "What is that stuff?" – you know – he was kind of going off like that and I said – I said – "Well, hey.." "Oh, it is? Oh okay well.. All right." – you know – but there had been a lot of – I think – nice reactions. There is a note that was from one of the residents of – maybe I shouldn't say the hotel –

I: [Inaudible].

FN: - well one of the hotels downtown –

I: You can say it actually.

FN: Can I say the hotel? **13:42** One of the residents of Marriott who I met said that it was a joy to look out of his window and see my piece, and so I've got quite a few favorable comments and there are people who will say that they didn't like it – but that's all about public art. **13:58** Public art is so that it enhances the environment or a specific side and I thought – you know – about that side and what it meant – you know – and so I've got some great comments about it and I'm quite pleased with it.

I: What do you hope when people actually look at the centerpiece? What do hope people will experience?

FN: **14:29** Well, the first I thing I hope is that they experience some joy because – joy from the excitement of color – and as I've stated earlier, I am known as a guy of color. I love vibrant colors! And so I hope the first reaction is, "Wow! That sure is busy and a lot of color" – you know – and then I hope that they start to investigate it to start to see some of the little images that represent – you know - growth and development, the little whimsical figures of buildings, and the sun, and the little water and images like that so they could say, "Well, yeah, that looks like the astrodome." or "That looks like the Pennzoil Building." **15:18** And then

at the same time, as they continue to rotate or circulate or walk around the planter, they start to see – well some things don't mean anything, it's just about his expression of color – his joy for color – and I think that when people come here – they come here to have fun. **15:38** They come here because we have the rodeo, and we have football and baseball and we - we – we – there are quite a few conventions here for whatever reason they're here. **15:50** They come downtown when it's time to come down to shop and have fun, and I think the sculptures should be fun to look at – you know – and should be just a variety of sculptures about sharing our little joy.

I: You talked a little bit about color and how much you love color. What do you love about color?

FN: **16:17** Well, I like contrasts and so you are going to see a lot of warms and cools in my work, and color for me can lift up people – you know. If you – if you were depressed or you've had a bad day and – and sometimes color can physically and mentally affect you. **16:50** You know, it can lift you or certain colors like there in nature and can make you – you know – solemn or tranquil – you know – moody – you know. **17:06** But I want my – my colors to invigorate people.

I: Okay. You know what? I wanted to go back. In the beginning, you were talking about commission. Can you explain a little bit about that and just to fill people in on how that came to be?

FN: **17:23** The commission – I got a call and asked if I would like to submit some designs and drawings or some sculpture downtown and my first response was, “Well, you know guys – you know – I really don't do sculpture. I'm a painter.” They said, “Well, we figured whatever you make is going to be colorful.” **17:48** And so it was a competition between four people and Michael Davis and I – Michael Davis is out in California. Our presentation was what they wanted, and so we went through continuous development of our thoughts and ideas and concepts about the work, and it was finally approved and what went about then - you know - fabrication.

I: Can you explain the (inaudible) just so the people know.

FN: **18:23** Well, well, the – the works were not funded by tax dollars. It was funded by private donors. In fact, there is – on Main between Lamar and Walker where the fountains are, there is an area where corporate and individual are inscribed that donated the funding. **18:57** Main Street District spearheaded this, and I think they raised \$6 million to beautify those three blocks. So it wasn't METRO

money, it wasn't state and city federal dollars. **19:19** All of that was private money, and I think that's one of the things the public should realize is that everything that they see downtown or anywhere is not always their dollars and anyway, to be a little truthful too, when we use the public's money, it's probably one cup of coffee out of each person's pocket and that won't hurt or break – you know – or make anyone – you know – if you think about what art does. When people – when Christo put up those drapes in New York at Central Park, people from all over the world flew to New York to see it. **20:05** So what did they do? They had to get hotels. They had to spend money on every cab, food. Public art generates funds for the city. Sometimes people come just to see that public art or while they are there, their experience is so positive that – you know – they ... they didn't think they were going to see, they come back, they tell their friends. **20:29** So there may be public funds spent, but there's more money generated by tourists and by people just going into that particular area and having dinner or lunch.

I: You know, that is kinda of one reason that I wanted to do this documentary because what – what I've learned from it is people don't realize the amount of work that goes into creating public art – kinda one day it's there and "Oh, there it is " and people may appreciate it or may not give it a second thought. Can you talk a little bit about the challenges that you face as a public artist?

FN: **20:02** Well, challenges aren't – aren't so – well, you know, one thing about challenges with public art – I think – is coming up with the right idea for the right or specific spot or area. **21:23** So I think people like public art, but they want to know how they can benefit from it – you see – and so the challenge is, convincing the public – you know – the average person that the public art in downtown or at the airport or wherever benefits the people of that city. **21:50** And so that may be one of the challenges – trying to – you know – I consider myself 'cause I'm a professor of U of H-Downtown. I've been there 29 years of my life. I'm a proud faculty member of that campus, but I'm an artist too. **22:07** I mean, since the third grade all I wanted to be was an artist. So teaching there is a great honor and privilege. But when I teach classes there, like on appreciation to students who – they take art only because of one reason and it's because they have three credit hours in fine arts, and they take my course and others, and so I get a great joy out of being what I consider an ambassador for the arts. I'm an artist. **22:36** At the same time, I have to be an ambassador when I teach and so the challenge of convincing the public or my students who are the public, who are taxpayers, and who will be entrepreneurs, who will be doctors and lawyers, who would – you know – own small companies or whatever – the challenge is making sure that the public – that the general public realizes that the art is an integral part of their lives, and it's not only that you have to like a particular piece but that piece

enhances the quality of life. **23:14** You know, life is about not just working hard all the time but having self-fulfillment, having some joy. It does not have to be a very heavy intellectual piece. It just may give you a smile, you see. So the challenge is making sure that the public understands why art is important.

I: Now I understand that Reverend Lawson [inaudible].

FN: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

I: Can you talk of it a little bit?

FN: **23:42** Yeah, Reverend Lawson. Reverend Lawson is Pastor Emeritus of Wheeler, and I knew Pastor Marcus Cosby, and I asked Reverend Lawson a couple of years ago would he dedicate my sculpture, and he is such a wonderful man, he is a gracious man and he brought to us Pastor Cosby –our new pastor – and so they both came to pray for my sculpture and someone would say “Why would they come to pray for your sculpture? **24:20** Why would they dedicate the sculpture?” Well, that’s tradition. That’s, that’s – It goes way back – you know. The pope would dedicate something in a chapel or whatever, and sometimes those in authority would not endorse or pray for a particular art piece as it was so controversial, and so I asked Pastor Cosby and Pastor Emeritus Lawson to come and pray for my work. **24:57** And they did and it was such a lovely occasion. As a matter of fact, Hank Neal – the director of music – sung a song on hope and there was a lady across the street. She stopped, and she was listening to it and after the service – after the ceremony - she came over and talked to Hank and said she was so overwhelmed by his song that she needed that song and so sometimes people need to art and so to have Pastor Emeritus Lawson and Pastor Cosby to come down and pray over my work – to dedicate it – was a great honor, and I was quite overjoyed by that.

I: Hey, any ... that you wanted to talk about that I might not have asked you about ... about Planter and Stems?

FN: **25:54** I can’t mention those things, and those paintings –

I: Yeah, right.

FN: Right, right, right. [inaudible] Right. I guess that – I think that your questions were great and I think that they were pretty broad. I think we covered it.

I: Okay.

FN: Yeah.

I: Thank you.

FN: **26:12** And I want to thank all of you. Because like the Pennzoil Building – okay – this represents those Pennzoil Buildings here, and this is my representation [Pause] Someone once said it looked like a cow, so – you know –you have a choice. **26:36** And also downtown – you know – we have the Bayous. It's like the Buffalo Bayou and the White Oak. So this is symbolic of those two major bayous downtown, and some elements are just there as whimsical marks and so ... light color and contrast, these are just things that really don't mean anything but they're just design elements. **27:06** On this side, it looks like a surfboard but it really is my representation of a street. You know, it always have a little white lights in the street. They ended up white – you know, it – this just sort of represents those little lights that are on the streets. Of course, this is a very sunny terrain. **27:26** A lot of sun in Houston and so we have a lot of skies and ... on the sky is red with white clouds. You know, a sky can be any color. And each wing, each side has its own design. **27:52** On this side, it's primarily about – you know – design and color contrast and whimsical shapes, so the patterns here on these blue and then these sort of red violet shapes with black and white lines are just to create a sense of contrast and vivid color.

[Tape Ends]