

I: Great. If you could just – introduce yourself. Say your name and what you do.

EW: **13:00:32**I am Elena Wortham, and I'm an artist in Houston. I'm mostly – I do mostly ceramics. I started with – I went to the Glassell School of Art at middle age, and – I had to take a course in sculpture and I fell in love with clay through – because of the media but also through the teacher – my teacher, **00:54** Bill Dennard, and – because of my background – I grew up in Mexico and back in Europe, and so I've always been surrounded – with ceramic from the – our – ancient Mexicans to the Europeans, and – it's a media that – it comes from the earth. The whole world use it from the beginning of time, and it's very, very versatile. **01:21** You can do from the simplest plate to beautiful pots to sculptures to walls to murals, and it's just – takes imagination and, of course, courage to – to push the clay as far as you can do it – far as – they crumble, they break, they crack, but if you are passionate about it, you go on and some beautiful things come out. **01:47** It's also very interesting because you give the clay to the fire, so all the – all the work that entitles the first phase can be destroyed in the kiln. **01:58** That's also – you give it to chance, because it's a lot of practice and studies and good kilns, but there's still a chance, and there's still the work of the – the heat – the fire that fuses everything together and plays some fantastic tricks or – or not. So. It's a very interesting media.

I: Tell me a little bit about –

Crew: Just a second. Pause it.

I: Elena, tell me about the piece downtown, where it's located, and how it came to be.

EW: **02:28** Well, the one downtown was called – when first started the test wall – I think it was the beginning of the Cotswold project, and they were looking for artists. And the architect, Mr. Rey de la Reza who was responsible for all the design, called me because he had seen a project I did in a show – which I was invited to a couple of years before – to help to enhance the city. **02:59** What – to chose a place in the city that we could change or enhance or – or revitalize – whatever you might say. So, from the drawing I – I did – I think he liked it. And – my project was to use – underneath the freeways where all these columns and wasted space – that is a very interesting space, almost like temples. **03:22** I wanted to build onto every column or every other – giants, so – colorful giants that would kind of inhabit that space that nobody really uses and – or trucks or trash or whatever. And I think from there – he invited me to participate to do something with that wall, and we met several times. **03:46** They wanted some ceramic pieces that – had been very vulnerable to the public. So after a few meetings we came up with the idea to make bronze leaves. I suggest leaves – tropical leaves like – like this one. This is a bronze leaf – that – all tropical leaves have a groove to discharge the water – the rainforests so they don't warp. **04:10** And Houston being so lush and green and surrounded by so many trees, I thought

leaves which are low would a very good solution. Unfortunately, water didn't flow well, and it was changed to fix the water flow with some ... so I added more leaves, and we did 36 more bronze leaves that unfortunately were stolen a few months later. **04:35** So they called me again, and we started from the beginning. And – I had all the leaves removed – well, the – the ones that were left, and changed the texture of the wall to a rough cement. I like materials to be what they are and not pretend – like cement pretending to be stone – so I didn't want those lines, and a friend of mine – a sculptor – erased them all and scratched, and we got this beautiful rough texture. **05:05** And then, just – as I'm sure many, many artists chose by do – like doodling and drawing and thinking about it, and I had this wall again – which had become a little bit of a nightmare for me – but – with – full of different holes. So, I decided just to go with my best – I – my best love or – my first idea was about color and about replicating some of the vegetation here, and – this spiral came out through – I think the spiral is playful. **05:39** It's an ancient design. It also exists all over nature from the smallest shell to the biggest hurricane and – and the tendrils of vines, and it's also an ancient image of – of human being. **05:57** So I decided to go with the spiral and then of course use the leaves as joy and it – it's – and color. And the leaves I got from gingers here and from cana lilies – or cala – cana lilies –

I: Yeah. Say that again if you want.

EW: Yeah. Cana or cala. Calas are the white.

I: Yeah.

EW: **06:15** But they also – the – cana – they – we have very colorful cana lilies here. And – and just playing with the spiral. And embedded it like – we – we put it in like a groove out of the cement, and – it turned out very well.

I: What kind of reactions have you gotten from it?

EW: **06:37** Well, while we were building it – see, it took me, like, two months to make the leaves. I had my assistant, Israel Margosa, who is an artist who – and the – the experience of – of installing it was very interesting because we spent, like, at least three weeks every day downtown on the street, and you get to know the life of the – of a street very well which – here we don't have enough street life because everybody drives and – so it was very interesting – you know, from the homeless that go by everyday to all the reactions as people went by – interest and admiration and fun. **07:16** It was a very positive, very interesting experience to be there. We got to know all the parking meter ladies, who are very, very strict, and all kinds, of you know – whatever works downtown outside in the street, and

- after it was done, nothing. I never had any feedback, either from newspapers or – some people wanted to call me to do other projects, but you know that’s just passing thoughts. **07:50** The only pictures I have that – of a – of the horse drinking the water – because I also did the spout of the – the so-called Icons ... And the horse is drinking from the water – no, the – I’m sorry, I made a mistake. There was one guy who came from the Houston Chronicle and took a picture while we were installing it, but nothing else. **08:16** And – it’s been working well. I like it when I go by. It still ... joy to look at it, and I hope to other people. And no vandalism, because they are totally flat. So, if they would like to remove any, they will have to break it.
- I: Tell me what – what’s your goal for that piece? What do you hope people experience when they look at the – at the piece?
- EW: **08:39** Well, what people should experience looking at any public art is surprise. To kind of jolt them out of their dailiness either with – with – you know, with delight or even anger. It’s nice to kind of get an emotional shock and – I feel that it – it enhances your day if it’s joyful. **09:07** It piques your curiosity, and also maybe wish – wishes for the pedestrians to have an other piece of surrounding in the environment that enhance the – the – the streets, or also make life more interesting. **09:25** Even if it’s a tiny instant of distraction from the dailiness and – I call it – that we all have to do is so boring sometimes. I think that’s one of the main reasons for public art.
- I: The thing that strikes me about your – that piece in particular is the color. When you and I talked on the phone, you talked about color. What is that you like about color so much?
- EW: **09:49** Well, color for me is life. If you notice, we are surrounded by color – nature. Not the city. The city is – pretty colorless, except for our trees, and I think – you look at nature; there’s some incredible instances of all the colors being together, and it makes you alive, makes you happy. **10:13** It makes you, I guess more positive or more hopeful. And I grew up with color – you know, in Mexico. All the celebrations – all – it’s just color. Even the smallest houses in small towns, they can be orange and yellow and – shocking pink, and of course the flowers are always like that. **10:31** So, for me color is like an intrinsic part of my life. Although, I love minimalist art and quietness, but at certain points – I think for everyday life to celebrate vitality – it’s color that – that gives it to me.
- I: Can you – for somebody who’s never seen the fountain, can you describe it and all its pieces. The – you know – the cascading, the –

EW: **10:56** The cascading in the back was Rey de la Reza's idea. And the – the wall – the shape of the wall – it was his idea. I came to this project with the wall up – that shape. I maybe would have changed some things, but that was the – the way they invited me, to – just use the wall as it was. **11:19** And, to explain – it's – people – is the sound of the water – if you hear it. Sometimes you don't hear because of the traffic. Most people I've seen in – all over the world – don't look up – don't look sideways. They're very committed to where they're doing, and they look down. **11:38** They don't look at the sky, and maybe to some ... although I'm not like a business woman – that [inaudible], but I look at my surroundings. And the wall really strikes you because it's very close to – to the person walking by. I mean, some just happy interpretations like fantasy vines – alive and I – like – throbbing. **12:00** I would like it to have more water, 'cause it would have other dimensions – especially at night. I don't know – you've seen it at night with the lights on that trough. The – it shines and ripples, and the shadows of water and light are beautiful, but – So, that's what I would see.

I: Good. What – I know you answered this already, but I'm going to ask it again. Why do you think public art is important?

EW: **12:27** Public art is – is – is part of our – our – the – the mesh of our lives and our sixth sense and we live in the city – mostly for urban – the people that are close into the city, not the suburban – but I think there should be public art all over to enhance, to make people – again observe, to sit around, to walk by, or to drive by. **12:53** I mean, I think it's an element that a city needs very, very urgently, especially this city. With color, with fountains, with water, and ... – I'm – most cities, mostly in Europe and Latin America – and they all have these beautiful plazas, squares, and – course, there's more walking, more street life, more – at street level – but I think that government of each city strives to have beautiful pieces as public art to make it more interesting and more valuable as a city.

I: Great. Elena, I think you've hit everything that I wanted to really ask about the piece. Is there anything that you want to add that I might not have asked you – about art or –

EW: **13:43** Well, I think we – we should strive to continue to make public art in spite of vandalism – because if they destroy we build it. We should also give – I know – there's always a – I've been in many project where – then we don't make them because there's never enough money, and I think there should be a special fund for that, because it's a legacy. **14:08** It's also beauty. It's also – in all neighborhoods. It's like the ... parks I told you – in every school there's some beautiful places where – the little public parks. The playground becomes a public park and – and they – the citizen ... can enjoy whatever the children may – or the

artist conceived. **14:26** But a submission that a city should have with all the artists – not necessarily be famous for an artist – which it would be nice to have one or two – but also to stimulate the art in our town and to make our city much better than it is.

I: Great. Terrific.

Crew: You might want to ask that first question again just for coverage.

I: Okay.

Crew: Just – I – I think we got it, but –

I: Do you remember what you said in the first time?

EW: More or less.

Crew: Sorry about that, ...

I: Oh, yeah, your [inaudible] Elena, if you could just introduce yourself and say what you do.

EW: **15:00** Well, my name is Elena Cusi-Wortham, and I'm an artist in – in the city. I've been here for many years. I went to school in my forties, when my children grew up – to the Glassell – School of Art, and I – I did the whole certificate, and – I had to do a three-dimensional sculpture course, and I went ceramics. And I just fell in love with it, especially with the teacher, **15:30** Bill Dennard, but also with the media. I had grew – I have grown – I grew up in Mexico City and partly in Europe, and ceramics there – since – have always been very in the – in focus – in public, and the beautiful clay pieces from ancient Mexico. **15:51** Absolutely fantastic from Peru, from the – you know, pre-Hispanic or pre-Columbian. And then in Europe – and – and then in Mexico the combination was Spanish and – and Latin American – and I just fell in love with clay. **16:06** And the versatility of the media, which – you can do anything from plates or play with children to sculptures, murals, and it's absolutely interesting to push it to its limits, to see if it's going to function or not. And you have to be courageous, like – I guess any artist with any media – to push yourself to the limit and then do it again. **16:31** From a drawing to, you know, any other sculpture. And – I think that's all I said.

I: You were talking about the clay and how the clay comes from the earth.

EW: **16:43**... Yeah. The clay is a natural material that comes from the earth all over the world. There are many kinds of clay. There is, of course, the glazes, the colors that's all from the earth. And then the – this piece of clay – you give it to the kiln, which is fire – which is another natural element – and then you give it to chance to see – to make the fire work, fuse it together and work with the colors, and some things, if you're experimenting can come absolutely beautiful – maybe non-repeatable – or they get destroyed – well, then you do it again. **17:21** So it's a double, triple process that is fascinating to me. I mean, you have to be passionate to continue no matter what, to do what you believe, and of course use your imagination all the way to the limits.

I: Great.

Crew: Let's try to get some ambience here, and then I'll try and make that – the noise again.