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Robin Nigh oral history interview by Suzette Berkman, March 30, 2007

Robin Franklin Nigh (Interviewee)

Suzette Berkman (Interviewer)

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SB: I am here today with Robin Nigh who is the Public Arts Manager for the City of Tampa. It is Friday. It's February 16, 2007, and I'm just delighted Robin that we could spend some time together.

RN: Thank you.

SB: [We] would like to hear all about you, and what you do, and your job. But more importantly, we want to get an insight into how you came to be where you are. Where were you born?

RN: I was born in Athens, Georgia. But it's kind of funny to say that because I was only there for nine months before my parents moved back to Florida. So I have to say that I'm a native Floridian in that sense.

SB: Where did they move back to?

RN: Fort Lauderdale, and then it was Jacksonville, and then it was Orlando. My father worked for Gulf Oil, so they were transferred a lot. And then I went to the University of Florida. So that brought me to Gainesville of course.

SB: Where did you have your high school and early years?

RN: Lake Worth High School. So I was in South Florida. Grew up on the East Coast pretty much though—greater part of it was there in Palm Beach County.

SB: Okay. When you were young did you have any idea you would study art?

RN: No, it's funny. I always liked it, but what I ended up doing and where I am now I had no idea even existed when I started. It was funny; I liked a lot of religious art. It's very funny. My mother used to tease me and say that I should have been born Catholic…

[Laughter]
RN: …Because every time we were in the stores or anything like that, I would pick up—and I didn't even know what a lot of it was, but you know, it was the Virgin Mary and these beautiful broaches. And I would take it over to my mother and say how beautiful it was, and she would just laugh at me and say, "You should have been Catholic."

[Laughter]

SB: But you weren't.

RN: But I was not, no.

SB: Had you seen the images in books or…?

RN: No.

SB: It just sort of came to you?

RN: Yes. And my parents one time—I mean, we always had lots of visual material around my—I mean, we always had these gifts book sets of world history and that type of thing, and I would always go through it, and I would always be struck by the images. But I really didn't even know art and the fields of the professionalism of art existed. When I went to college, I went into pre-med actually.

SB: My gosh.

RN: Because so many people—you know, I thought that was a real responsible thing to do. And I loved—you know, I thought it was fascinating. I had anatomy courses and all that stuff in high school, and I dissected everything from you know, cats and pigs and sharks and cows and that kind of thing. And I remember where I lost it in nursing was when they wheeled in our very own John Doe.

SB: A cadaver?

RN: Yes. And I just could not, couldn't handle it. But I was really struck also—it's funny this is where it really—the leap was. Where it started was in the anatomy class they showed a film about the workings of the inner body and this kind of thing. And the photography in the body in the film was just so beautiful in terms of how the body moved, and how it worked. And I was the only student in there probably not really interested in…

SB: [Laughs]

RN: …the muscle striations of how everybody else in there was looking at them. But I was looking at them by their formal analysis and their formal ways, and the shape and the color and the texture and how you moved. And that really struck me.
SB: But you hadn't taken art classes in high school?

RN: No. I took one art class in high school. And it was really awful in the sense that I—it was a class that all the loafers took.

SB: Oh, okay.

RN: And the teacher had no discipline on that. And I had recently hurt my hand very badly. So I could not really do a lot of the art work there because I had just come out of the hospital and all that stuff. So it was rather just, you know, didn't hit it at all there, so….

SB: So you're in pre-med.

RN: I'm in pre-med.

SB: And how did it evolve?

RN: Well, I walked out of the class, the anatomy class, and I thought, "Well, photography is practical."

[Laughter]

RN: So I registered for a photography class.

SB: How interesting.

RN: And I really went up to, through photography, and it just took off.

SB: And this was where again?

RN: This was actually at a community college…

SB: Okay.

RN: …because I was working part time, so I was in at Palm Beach Community College and took all these photo classes, and actually had a—it was a wonderful dynamic art department in the sense that when I did go to University of Florida, in terms of execution and formalities and technical details and all of that, I was way ahead. Because my instructor at the college had invented a particular type of an enlarger, and he had—you know, I had purchased one from him so when I was at UF I had my own dark room. And it was the high tech cold-light enlarger. He was a consultant for Kodak at the time. So it was really amazing. I mean, I had learned a lot.
And that's when I took my first art history class. Well, it wasn't, I took art history at the community college too, and that guy was wonderful, Mr. Smith. But those survey courses are grinds.

[Laughter]

RN: They're horrible. But I liked it, and it was just kind of rote memorization, and he didn’t—you know, we talked about, you know, good teachers so a few minutes ago, and although his heart was in it, he just—I used to count stick people, how many times he stuttered in class. So he just was ready for retirement.

SB: So you kind of didn't pursue art in a way due to that experience.

RN: Really, no. I mean, I didn't….

SB: And then you got to University of Florida, and you took art classes.

RN: I did. Actually it's funny because when I transferred to UF, I transferred as photo-journalism. Again trying to be very pragmatic, I went into the College of Communications thinking—really, really resisting—really fighting this art bug because it was just—it was not supported at home, number one. And I just really couldn't see where there was any future.

[Laughter]

RN: So from that I just finally, I ended up taking a fine art course. I also took all my electives like, in Physics and that type of thing, but Physics of Photography…

SB: Oh my gosh.

RN: ...the physics of how the lens worked and how everything just kind of put together in structuring processes.

SB: There's such a class?

RN: Yes. It was really wonderful.

SB: My gosh.

RN: I did take a fine art class there and that led me, bit by bit, into art history. And it was when I got to art history, I just….

SB: You knew.

RN: I knew. And it was really funny because I was really struggling [with], “What do I major in photography or art history—photography, art history, or this or whatever?” And
I remember sitting in an art history class, and I closed my eyes, and I said, "Okay, what's the one thing I can't live without? What's the one thing that would really hurt to lose?" And it was this learning about art, and learning about the history of art. And not really getting into one thing, or just—I didn't want to be tied to photography. Although I missed the brown fingers from that.

[Laughter]

RN: I guess they don't even do that anymore now but, you know…

SB: You need to explain that for people who might not know.

RN: Well when the—they don't do it too much anymore—but in darkrooms, all of those materials that you develop your images in are, you know, they turn your fingers brown. You're not really supposed to stick your fingers in it. But I did like that sense of touch. I liked that sense of processing. You could rub an image really in one area more than another area when it's in a developer and bring it up faster and make it darker, and play with the tone a lot that way. So at first I thought I would really miss that, but I didn't.

SB: With your art classes then did you take practical drawing and…

RN: Yes.

SB: …all of that?

RN: The drawing, the painting…

SB: Along with the history?

RN: …sculpture, all that. Yes. And it was really wonderful.

SB: It helps to add to the experience.

RN: Hugely so, to understand the process. I think there really needs to be more of that. Art historians need to take art classes, art—I know there's a requirement, but there really needs to be a balance of that. There's one regret that I have in regards to that, and that's when I was at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago. They had a course on processes in which you would learn fresco and you would learn a lot of the—tempera—a lot of the materials and processes that aren't typical and real normal…

SB: It's important.

RN: …in the everyday world right now. And I regret I didn't take that. I took another art history class instead. Which I loved, but it helps you, one, not only be a better instructor, but when you're really working out there in the practicum of it—which relies so much of what I do now—understanding process is critical.
SB: What year were you at the University of Florida?

RN: I graduated in '81.

SB: So your experience at Chicago—Art Institute of Chicago?

RN: Yes I skipped…

SB: Was that graduate?

RN: I skipped a little bit of time in there, yes. And I graduated from there in '91. So I used to tease my husband that "every decade, I'll get a degree!"

[Laughter]

RN: Except I missed 2001, that's when I was supposed to get my doctorate and I just kind of gave up.

SB: Oh my gosh.

RN: But…

SB: Well what took you to Chicago for your graduate?

RN: I'm being a little circuitous here.

[Laughter]

RN: From graduate…

SB: That's okay, we'll cover it.

RN: From UF I went to Penn State. I got a scholarship to go to Penn State.

SB: Okay.

RN: So I was studying art history at Penn State and that's where I really learned core research skills. And they had a fantastic library. And I just loved it.

SB: What made you choose Penn State?

RN: The director of the art department at UF went there, and wrote me a letter of recommendation.

SB: Ah-ha!
SB: Good reason! [Laughs]

RN: And I got a scholarship. And it was wonderful. So it was again, really got ensconced into—and that's also where I began to learn so much about celebrating difference and recognizing where you are in appreciating that. Penn State obviously is so different from Florida, and I loved it.

I lived—I was in the graduate dorms. And I was there for really about three weeks before I befriended my first American.

SB: Oh my.

RN: Because I was in the international dorms and there were—my roommate was German, and then the neighbors were Australian, and then we had a Spaniard and we had a Turk and we had the Greeks, we had every—it was just really wonderful. And that just was just a whole world of opening up for me. And maybe because of that, I don't know, it's not really quite a linear thing, but I wanted to study overseas. So I applied for—to go to Oxford for a year.

SB: Interesting.

RN: As an overseas study program. And I'll never forget, I walked into the graduate office at Penn State, and a colleague of mine—I caught him making fun of me with another friend of mine, and saying, "As if we thought we're Oxford material," kind of chuckling. And that was a really good lesson because I walked back to my dorm, and Mark came over to apologize—that was his name—nice, nice guy. And he just said, "Robin, I just don't think any of us are Oxford material." And I said, "Well Mark, I'm going to let Oxford tell me that. Thank you but, if I believed all of that…” I mean sometimes I need to reflect on that and remember it a little more in terms of self confidence, because it’s really important.

SB: Yes, indeed.

RN: So I went to Oxford and that's where I met my husband.

SB: Oh, interesting!

RN: And he [was] born and raised in Chicago!

SB: That's how you got to Chicago.
RN: That's how I got to Chicago.

SB: Isn't that interesting.

RN: And well…

SB: Well tell us about your experience at Oxford. What did you study? What did you learn?

RN: Medieval art and philosophy. I think I had—I majored in every period of art history.

SB: Wow.

RN: Each new art history class was my favorite.

SB: Does that tie in with the Madonna interest?

RN: Actually it was really wonderful because not so much in terms of subject, but in terms of spirit.

SB: Okay.

RN: In terms of thinking about what they were trying to portray with the image. And I find that fascinating. Because it is kind of a spirit-mind-body and soul type of thing. And one of the courses—I set up my tutorials so that I—which, in Oxford you're given—you're just basically a tutorial type program. You just have these type of classes that you set up as you so wish. And I set mine up on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday so that I could travel Friday through Monday. And one of my instructors was for Gothic cathedrals, and she sent me to Paris for the week to, you know, look at all these cathedrals and what to look at…

SB: Oh gosh.

RN: …and that type of thing. And another one of the instructors was on Medieval British painting. So we went to all of these small little churches and looked at all of these frescos that were, you know, sixth and seventh and eighth centuries. They were phenomenal.

SB: Oh yes.

RN: And it was really life changing obviously. And I—so I was—well, there's a lot that goes on in between, but…

[Laughter]

SB: It doesn't have to be linear.
[Laughter]

RN: Oh good. Good. Because briefly in that moment, I did elope when I was in Oxford with somebody else who wasn't my—I mean, who I'm not married to now.

[Laughter]
SB: You eloped?


SB: And you got married.

RN: Yes.

SB: Okay.

RN: To this Greek that I met when I was at Penn State.

SB: Alright.

RN: And then we went and we spent a lot of time in Greece, okay. And I fell in love with Greece.

SB: Oh, I can imagine.

RN: Oh, once you get out of Athens it's wonderful.

SB: My gosh. Oh, it's beautiful.

RN: And so each of those though—because they each—it does really connect in terms of when I was in Greece. And you went to Delphi, and I remember walking up, you know, in Delphi to the temples and so on and walking up the steps of the agora and in Athens, and how your thighs just burn. I'm thinking, I said, "this is why Greek sculptures look the way they do." It's because they're really reflected by the environment.

SB: Yes.

RN: It's very much—this is the landscape, this is what the art looks like. When I was in Amsterdam, I was really struck by—all of a sudden I understood Dutch painting. Now I get it, because now I know what they're painting when they're painting the light. And it really came to trying to catch each place that I was at; all of a sudden I understood that art.

SB: But you had to be there to see it.

RN: Yes.
SB: I think so too.

RN: Yes.

SB: Well, could you give us the year that you eloped? Just so that we can piece this together?

[Laughter]

RN: Get a point of reference here.

[Laughter]

RN: Yes. Let's see... That was '83.

SB: Okay.

RN: But filed for divorce in 84.

SB: [Sighs]

RN: It was a mistake. It was a mistake. I fell in love with his country and not him.

SB: Okay.

RN: And what happened is that we were—it was funny, we were transferred to Rome. And I realized well, let's see, "why am I going to Rome?" It was one of those questions again, "what would I miss? Why am I going to Rome? Well, to study with Dr. Batiste, to travel, to see art, to shop..." And Stavros came fifth. So I thought, I'm being really dishonest if I go to Rome. So I really can't—as much as I'd love to, I can't go to Rome. It's just not, not the direction my life should go.

So that was... But all this time Scott, who is my husband now, who I met in Oxford, we were very good friends. We were pub buddies in Oxford. And we used to go out. And he also taught me something very important, again, about celebrating where you're at, which is really core to what I do now. And we would only have whatever is there. For instance, what's regional, get what's indigenous, celebrate it and enjoy it.

SB: That's nice.

RN: So you know, I'd have—we'd have whatever the beers were for wherever we were at. You'd have to have what was locally brewed and that type of thing. And we would talk about life, truth, and beauty in the most broad sense. He was a philosophy major, and I was going through Catechism for Greek Orthodoxy, so I would talk to him about third and fourth and fifth century early Christian writers. And we would just talk about...
SB: Sounds like you matched intellectually.

RN: Yes. He was—he's my best friend.

SB: That's wonderful.

RN: He's my best friend. And so moving to Chicago was kind of an interesting thing. I was accepted into the PhD program at the same time that I was accepted to transfer to the School of the Art Institute from Penn State. And whatever I did in moving to Chicago, whether Scott was right or not, I wanted to make it—it had to work. Because I wasn't going to move for someone. I had already messed that one up.

[Laughter]

RN: So I went and interviewed at Northwestern. And I'll never forget that interview. I walked in and the medievalist there who was wearing very sensible medievalist shoes… She wasn't at all like the fun medievalists that I knew in Oxford. She says, "So, you say you go to Penn State, well, who's on the faculty there?" Like it's a quiz!

SB: Oh gosh.

RN: And I'm thinking, I thought to myself, "Well you know what? You smell like dust!"

[Laughter]

SB: Oh gosh! [Laughs]

RN: So we weren't off to a good start. And I thought—it was just—the pressure and the tension. And it was so pretentious. That was it I guess, that I just…. So then I went to the School of the Art Institute, and it was funny. There's more irony in this than you can imagine, because it was also Halloween. And that's when I'm also meeting my potential in-laws.

[Laughter]

RN: That was so appropriate for my mother-in-law anyway!

[Laughter]

RN: She's a very nice lady though! We get along great now, but she really did bristle at me at first. She truly did. But anyway…. [Laughs] That was very funny.

Anyway, so I walked into the School of the Art Institute, and these kids have safety pins in their nose, and they…
SB: Oh no!

RN: It's the whole punk thing is in. And I thought, you know what? It was great because I smelled art. I smelled art getting made—they were—I just, I loved that smell. It brought me back to the days when I was doing photography myself. Because process was mixed right in with learning about it. And it was alive, and it was happening, and I thought, "This is so cool."

SB: That's great.

RN: It also made me realize how much fun and frustrating at the same time it is, working with living artists. Not all the dead ones. It made me—like an art history—the medievalism…. It made me question—because I mean, I had this great paper one time. I never forget it. It was like, "this is an awesome paper!" It was a whole word-image thing, bringing in Kafka and these artists, it was fabulous. And I called the artist to talk to her about it and she says, "Well no, that's not what I had in mind at all."

SB: Oh no.

RN: And I thought—no, that was the best thing she could have done. It was a great experience. I thought how much art history is considered history and not interpretation or criticism? How much are our historians…

SB: It was a good lesson.

RN: …appropriating, and adding on artist’s intent? And it was a real life changing moment for me where the light bulb went off, and I thought, "Wow." It's really cool working with living artists, because they're around to say, "No, you're wrong."

SB: Is there a wrong?

RN: No that's a…

SB: I mean art is…

RN: …very good point too.

SB: …subjective of course too.

RN: That's an excellent point. Because one interpretation is equally as valid as another. But certainly piling on meaning that, that's all what—you know, because I guess it's also why I found art history so exciting is because I was coming in at, just at the time of the who revisionist methodologies. So even how it's all approached was fascinating. So it all kind struck me.

SB: Now, just again to sort of leave a marker, this was when?
[Laughter]

RN: I went to the school in '84. Yes, '84—April of ['84]—so I was, I started in the fall of '84 at the school.

SB: And you did get your masters?

RN: I got my masters there.

SB: At the Art Institute in Chicago. And did you work there?

RN: I did. I taught art history at the School of the Art Institute, which was wonderful. There's nothing like teaching in front of the art itself, instead of, you know…

SB: Oh sure.

RN: At that time there were either slides, or you could go stand in front of it. So I taught there. I worked at the Terra Museum of Art as Assistant Curator to a wonderful mentor who was incredible. And then I also became Director of Sculpture Chicago. Which is a…

SB: What is that?

RN: It was—it's kind of been absorbed into the public art program in Chicago now, and then again as you'll hear that this also was a real defining moment in the sense, Sculpture Chicago was a nonprofit organization that sponsors, or brought in, monumental sculpture to downtown Chicago. Not unlike Lights On Tampa, which in many ways informed Lights on Tampa in terms of structure and process and that kind of thing.

SB: I see.

RN: And it also turned me into how much fun it is—I mean, I love teaching—but how much fun it is working with living artists. Frustrating, yes, but that's also part of the process too.

I'll never forget one artist—he's Richard Deacon—fabulous sculptor out of London. He's trying to unload his work, and they won't do it because he hadn't pulled a permit, and he didn't know he was supposed to pull a permit. These boring little details. So I'm running down to City Hall….

SB: Is this Chicago?

RN: In Chicago. …after a permit, why this guys' trying to do…. And here he is, you know, a major sculptor…

SB: Oh no.
RN: …and we learned together!

[Laughter]

RN: We said, "Oh well…" [Laughs]

SB: How long did you do that?

RN: About three years, about three years.

SB: Was that the jumping off point to your tenure here?

RN: No. We moved back to Florida, and it was really—I was teaching, I actually moved back to Palm Beach County for a while, had a baby. That was one of the reasons why we came back. It's amazing what children make you do, isn't it?

SB: [Laughs] Sure. Because your family was here.

RN: Family was here. My dad was ill and it was—it looked like it was a bad spin, so it looked like, "Well, let's go be closer there for a while." And we ended up staying in Palm Beach County for a couple years. So I was teaching. I was teaching while I was working finishing up my masters. Because my masters took a long time to finish mostly because I was working so much with Sculpture Chicago, kind of things went on hold for that for a while. And I taught at Palm Beach Community College where I originally started. Lynn University, which is in Boca Raton, and I also taught at Florida International University. So I taught at…

SB: Wonderful.

RN: …those three schools at the same time while I was working on my masters. So finally finished that. When that happened I was accepted into the PhD program at Florida State. And that was with the Appleton Fellowship Award. And that's why—I mean, you know, we ended up in Tallahassee. And so from Tallahassee my husband and I, both within 24 hours of each other were offered jobs that would bring us to Tampa.

SB: Oh isn't that interesting.

RN: So we kind of figured it was meant to be.

SB: What, may I ask what he does?

RN: He is Regional Vice President for a company called ____________ which, and he's in the real estate branch, so he handles mergers and acquisitions for Coldwell Banker primarily.
SB: Where was his family from?

RN: Chicago.

SB: Chicago. Oh, I'm sorry, you've mentioned that.

RN: Yes, that's—that's what made me—I said, "I love Chicago." I mean you go in, and it's baseball and it's old style and it's…

SB: It's a great city.

RN: It's a great town.

SB: Yes. And before we left Chicago, I really wanted to ask you if you had some favorite stories from your experience there. You shared one about the London artist, and I know you had many to share from your experiences here in Tampa. But before we leave Chicago, did…?

RN: There was one. Whenever we were installing a Richard Serra sculpture. Well there's two actually, both of them kind of relate to Richard. But we had to close Michigan Avenue to bring a sculpture in.

SB: Oh gosh!

[Laughter]

SB: Oh my.

RN: That was fun. Because it was just….

SB: The whole of Michigan Avenue?

RN: All—the whole Michigan Avenue.

SB: Oh my goodness.

RN: The whole of Michigan Avenue. Right over the Michigan Avenue Bridge. And the thing is, the sculpture weighed 60 tons, and we're installing it on an elevated plaza. So I remember poring over the plans with all the engineers, "How are we going to install it?" And it goes back to something else that's kind of interesting. Because then it was on the radio, it was right outside the am station, WGN, that Wrigley owns. And the radio announcer there, who I like very much, he was making all these cracks about the sculpture, and about how it looks and why it's installed that way. And even the art critic, Alan Artner was saying—talked about, "Well, it would be better if it were installed this way." And I thought, you know what? Again, it goes back to not knowing—or at least in hearing the artist's intent. Because Richard actually had a great reason for doing that.
Because it framed the Wrigley building actually. But also because that's where the struts were underneath, and it was the only way it wouldn't fall down! [Laughs]

SB: Oh my goodness.

RN: And so it was this real kind of...

SB: Fascinating.

RN: ...mix to hear interpretation not getting—not informed with all of the knowledge. And that's one of the reasons why I guess I'm such an anal-detail person in the sense that, well it must be that, "Let's figure out why it's that way before we make a judgment. Whether it's that way because of the stress load, whether it's that way because of the artist's intent or whatever." But the final thing on that was kind of cute. We were bringing tours through and school kids through—I said, "The kids get it." They totally get it...

[Laughter]

RN: They walk in the middle of Richard's piece, and they say, "I feel like I'm in a giant taco."

[Laughter]

RN: And I thought, you know, "That's why we do this!"

SB: Isn't that wonderful, Robin.

RN: It really is. So, it was just all...

SB: I was going to ask you what it looked like, and they sort of got it.

RN: Well, it's funny because the piece actually was entitled, "Call Me Ishmael." And it's in my—goes back because it was inspired by Moby Dick.

SB: Is it still there?

RN: No. Unfortunately, we were going to—the city wanted to purchase it. But at the same time, again, it goes back to—you never know how things really get there. The city at the same time it was looking at purchasing this received a donation of a much lesser Richard Serra, if I do say so myself. Because of the—I can't remember the name—and it's best maybe I don't say the name of the ad agency—had purchased a Richard Serra, the art consultant. And they couldn't install it in their building because the stress load was too much for their building. So they ended up donating it to the city.

SB: Interesting.
RN: Isn’t that fascinating?

SB: But I'm glad you brought up about your thesis. I'd love for you to tell us what it was, and why?

RN: Well, my thesis was on *Moby-Dick*. And actually, the abstract expressionists. Primarily abstract expressionists, but I said art through 1990 so that I could actually include Richard's work in it. And it was a real word-image study primarily on how a literary reference, which was *Moby-Dick* of course, influenced all of these artists. And how they visually interpreted and spoke to, you know, the context of his imagery. And it's very different than illustration. I mean, you get a copy of *Moby-Dick*, and what's—Richard Boardman¹, I think is the artist's name if memory serves, who illustrated an early edition of *Moby-Dick*. But it's not like that at all. It's really talking about the essence of good and evil, and everything really that the abstract expressionists were about, or trying to articulate.

But it's kind of interesting, because one of the things that I found in the most interesting discovery of that thesis really came in a footnote. In which—when I and it was also talking to William Baziotes, an abstract expressionist artist. I spoke with him—wait a minute, maybe it.... [I] spoke with his—spoke with him. It was another artist whose wife I spoke with. And he said, "You know, it really wasn't... We were getting all of our information from Fritz Bultman." And I said, "Who the heck is Fritz Bultman?" And Fritz Bultman was a psychoanalyst, and evidently he was a writer. I mean he was the new—the Jungian of the time up there in New York. And he wrote about *Moby-Dick* and this kind of thing. And come to find out, it's also through a poet named Charles Olson who was really important because Charles Olson wrote a book about *Moby-Dick* that they were reading. And then Fritz Bultman plagiarized Charles Olson, his poetry, and plagiarized his work. And actually he was sued by Charles Olson like years later, but all of these artists were interpreting it...

[End Tape 1, Side A]

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[Tape 1, Side B]

SB: Robin you were in Chicago, but now we're moving back to Palm Beach where you then went.

RN: Right.

SB: And what were your experiences?

RN: I was in West Palm for about—I think it was two or three years [in] which I did some teaching at various colleges, which I loved very much. Finished my masters, had

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¹ Boardman Robinson was an American painter, illustrator, and cartoonist who illustrated *Moby Dick*. 


another baby, and then received notification that I had been accepted to FSU with an Appleton Fellow to go teach at FSU.

SB: But just to digress now, another baby. So that's…

RN: Two.

SB: Two?

RN: Two.

SB: And you still have just the two?

RN: Just the two.

SB: And they are?

RN: They are Dylan and Jacob. Dylan is 17…

SB: Okay.

RN: …and Jacob is 13.

SB: Oh, okay. Well let's go back to…

RN: So we went up to FSU, and it was really kind of, at first I felt a spy because…

[Laughter]

RN: …I was a Gator on an FSU campus!

[Laughter]

RN: It was a little hard sometimes. But I was taking—I was a PhD in art history and criticism. So I was writing or reading a lot for that, and teaching art history for that as well. Worked in the museum—and this is actually, was kind of an interesting spin here. Because I also was working there doing the art in public places for the state there at FSU. Not the entire state, just FSU's…

SB: I see.

RN: …portion of the campus. And while I was doing that I was also, as I mentioned, still a student. And I ended up taking a lot of anthropology classes. So that was kind of…

SB: What made you do that?
RN: Well, I did it because I was fascinated in terms of process…

SB: Okay.

RN: …and in terms of cultural difference and celebrating that. So when I was working on my doctorate, even though my major was contemporary art with a minor in contemporary… And this is how the universities kind of divvy things up, which was real problematic, and one of the reasons—my ultimate frustration why I didn't stay. But my minor was in non-western American. I kind of created it myself. Which included Latin American, African American, Polynesian American… So I studied all of that, those cultural groups in addition to, of course, contemporary art. Because in studying contemporary art you cannot be myopic and just look at what's on your New York galleries. And one of those courses in the African American was really, I think, a life changing moment in the sense that [I] was working with this wonderful scholar guest instructor. Robert Thompson from Yale was teaching a course, and one of the things we had to do was to go out into the field and do some work. And I chose to look at African American cemeteries. And so I was looking at a lot of these cemeteries…. By the way I was looking at writing my dissertation at this point on either some African American sculptors that was, liked very much, or performance art. Because I was really very much interested in performing arts. And I was leaning more and more towards that. I had worked with a lot of Native American performing artists, and African American performing artists. And it was really all constructed very much around space, what their notion was and how they were making a cultural space, which was fascinating.

So, I really didn't expect to go down the path I went to when I started on this grave paper, but I ended up looking at well over—went into every African American cemetery that I could find within this whole area of South Georgia and North Florida. And they were the most beautiful constructions. And you know, at first, my kids actually, it's very funny because they would go with me, and I would go with, you know, with my camera….  

SB: They weren't afraid?

RN: Not in the least. They were very respectful. They would set up flowers where they had fallen over and that kind of thing. They were so comfortable as a matter of fact—one quick digression…. I'm on the way to pick up my eldest, and my youngest is in the back seat and he screams, "Look mom! A cemetery, can we go?"

[Laughter]

RN: But I mean they knew that the cemeteries were not—the dead didn't decorate the cemeteries. The living made the cemeteries.

SB: Sure.
RN: And the spaces, those cemeteries, those graves—so many of them were just incredibly beautiful installations. And that's what really struck me, is that those installations had as much dignity—well more dignity I will say, but that they had as much beauty and meaning as any art installation than I had seen in a lot of galleries.

SB: How interesting. Were individual artists? They're doing it or was one artist in charge of a particular cemetery?

RN: No, no, no artists at all. They were just family members. And I've....

SB: Decorating the tombs…

RN: The graves.

SB: …and graves.

RN: Yes, of their loved ones. And I asked some of the African Americans there, because there was some—actually it was a janitorial staff at FSU. And I became good—I befriended these guys, and I’m asking them, I said, "now Freddy…"—He's the one that told me about this one particular cemetery where his mom was at. And it was just so moving and beautiful.

SB: How interesting, gosh!

RN: And they had water spigots sticking out, and he told me about his mother's grave particularly, and I photographed it, and I took him back a photo of it. And when I submitted the article for publication, it's funny, that's the one that they chose for the cover, the lead photo of it. And again it goes back to so—there's an artist within each of us is really what it kind of said to me. And we don't—I mean, artists in the professional sense, are a little more articulate in bringing it out. And sometimes you don't know that it's there. But I think it's within us each. And I guess it’s a visualization of the spirit.

SB: Sure.

RN: Is what I'd like to maybe think of it as. And it was also extremely cultural. Which taught me—it's funny, because my dad went with me when he was not feeling well. He was in the front seat and Scott was driving, and I was in the back seat. And so we're going to these cemeteries so that I could hop in and out and all that stuff. And my father, I'll be honest, he was a Florida cracker, you know, white man of the '50s. He had never been in an African American cemetery. It was a whole new space for him. And he looked around and he says, “Wow. These cemeteries are, I mean, they're really nice.” And he didn't realize that they were so different. And likewise, the African Americans that I was working with at FSU who told me about these graves, they said, "Ya'll don't decorate these graves this way?" And I said, "No. No we don't."

SB: Isn't that interesting.
RN: When I asked Barbara, the cleaning lady, I asked her. I said, "Barbara, why did you do this—put this on the grave?" And she said, "You guys don't do that?"

[Laughter]

RN: I said, "No." And when I found out in so much of the reading is that it's really, it's kind of cool, because it all really is because it's so much of tradition that's just passed down. And it's still very segregated in the churches. And particularly the cemeteries that are tied to the churches, it's just passed down. And it's very Yoruba traditions, it still comes right out of Africa, and they're gorgeous.

SB: It's amazing.

RN: And a lot of it—again, I started with one particular artist who I mentioned earlier, a sculptor who, a lot of his forms looked like these forms I had seen in the cemeteries. And I asked him, I said, "Had you, did you do that…?" He goes, "No, but I like that interpretation."

SB: So where did these people learn to do this type of art?

RN: From their families…

SB: From their hearts, from their families.

RN: From their families, from their churches…

SB: So it was passed down.

RN: Let me just tell you, I'll tell you a little snippet. Some of them, one grave [was] covered with blue marbles. I mean things that—creatively it's the most beautiful way you would never think of doing—it totally…

SB: Blue marbles.

RN: Because of… yes. Because it would reflect—and I found it through Yoruba traditions, blue is the water, it's baptism, it's the crossroads…

SB: I see.

RN: And it just totally made me rethink faith, art, what we do, where we're at. I mean this whole kind of context that these are such meaningful spaces.

SB: Are you saying that that artist had seen blue marbles used before? Did he create it?
RN: No, the blue marbles was something different. The blue marbles was something that I had—I know from reading the Yoruba—again, it comes from anthropology, and that methodology, kind of applying that to this paper that I wrote with that. But the artist that I was looking at actually—the forms, just some of the basic forms, that are in there. For instance in some, whether it's the textured stone that they would do—it's not uncommon in some African American cemeteries to have three types of markers: have a headstone, have a footstone, and if they're in the military, they'll have another stone. So you can have three types of markers. The headstone is often times block letters, it's quite normal for the family member to make the headstone. And it's just—it just moves me. Because Freddy for instance, with his mother's headstone, he just looked... I could cry I mean... he looked back and he reflected, he says, "My dad made that headstone." And his wife's name was spelled wrong. He couldn't write. And I thought, "You know, this has got so much dignity."

SB: So that was his way of expressing, since he couldn't write.

RN: Exactly. And that to me had so much meaning. And it looked so much like the installation art of the cultural groups that I have been working with. So I really think it's kind of funny because it's place making, it's a cultural space, and wouldn't it be kind of neat to kind of put theory into practice. Which is ultimately where I made the jump into public art. Because it is—all of that is just a whole theoretical construct in terms of how you're applying what you believe, how you move through space, how you construct space. And, I was, I mean, I wrote an article out of that, and it was published, but I thought, "Well, wouldn't it be cool if you took that and applied some of those methodologies to art in the public realm." Not making art in public places—not a sculpture in a plaza, but make something that completely envelopes, or can make an identifier of a community. And understand how powerful artists are also in terms of constructing a space. They really have an amazing amount of power in terms of—when they make something visual out there, how you—they certainly can't control how you interpret it, but they control what you see to interpret. And that to me is fascinating. Because that also helps construct who we are. So it's lots of levels with that.

And when I tried to articulate that as a dissertation topic, first of all I'm sure I didn't do a very good job articulating it. I'm not sure that I have now. But it was a real problem for them to—and it's, this is so funny because... I was doing public art, I had done public art in Chicago, and they didn’t want me to do—they didn't see public art as a viable dissertation topic.

SB: Oh my gosh.

RN: But somebody else was doing public art as a dissertation who had never done public art. Because she was writing at it—about it, from a very art historical perspective. But you know, again, it goes back to, I think it's all very multivalent in terms of who we are, how we have meaning. It's very fluid. You can't put a rigid structure. And that's again why I like it, because it's very messy. Public art is...
RN: It's very messy.

SB: I would like to understand more of what you mean by that. I mean in terms of—you can't put it in a—you can't pigeonhole it.

RN: You can't pigeonhole it. It doesn't stand still. I have been doing public art for over 20 years administrative experience. And not one contract has been the same. Not one. I learned something new [with] every artist. I learned something new every process…

SB: It sounds like you should have been an engineer though, because those come into play doesn't it?

RN: Oh yes, it does, it does. You're right. And that's, the other thing is, I love processes. It's also something that I got out of Chicago, as my boss who I mentioned was a—I worked at the, with Sculpture Chicago. But my boss, the chairman of the program was a developer. And literally, you saw buildings; you saw the skyline change in his office. You saw models come in; you saw things just kind of happen. And I love seeing things come out of the ground. There was one conference that we went to and it wasn't his conference table, but the chairman of Chicago Dock and Canal was on our board, had a new toy. And so we went in for our board meeting in there, and he'd press a button, and it was like out of James Bond…,

SB: [Laughs]

RN: …the conference table rose up, and the whole skyline of Chicago was there. And everything he owned…

SB: Oh my gosh.

RN: …was in white, and everything everybody else owned was gray.

[Laughter]

SB: That's a very memorable visual experience.

RN: It made an impression.

SB: I would think, sure.

RN: But again, I just love—it's that fluidity. It doesn't change, it won't—don't think it's going to be there forever either, because it…

SB: The fluidity on the part of the artist or on the part of your experience?
RN: Both, both very much so.

SB: Okay.

RN: It's…

SB: Sounds like you love your job.

RN: Most of it.

[Laughter]

RN: There are challenges, but there's challenges everywhere of course. And it is, as I mentioned, I learn a lot. There's just frustrations in terms of city processes. Sometimes it feels like it…

SB: Tedious.

RN: …steeps in mud, yes. And I would much rather be out there working to continue to make a difference. And sometimes it just seems like there's so much scut work in terms of, you know…

SB: What brought you specifically to this job? Had you come to Tampa for any other reason other than this job?

RN: No, I came here for this job.

SB: Had you heard anything about the art scene in Tampa that either drew you or made you cautious?

RN: Actually, what drew me to Tampa was that it—it's diversity. Because in Tallahassee, as lovely as it is, and hilly and beautiful, and the dogwoods and the magnolias, and the azaleas and all that…. It is very white. And I did not feel, even though I just spoke all, you know, so much about these African American cemeteries, but the world that we were in was lots of—I just didn't feel like it was…. It was so homogeneous, is the word I guess I want to say. And I felt like it wasn't even fair for my children to experience a world that was so much like them. And what I found so exciting about Tampa was it's diversity, was Ybor City, was that even—I didn't realize how small it was, but the Seminoles that were here, in terms of the small reservation, which is now since gone basically. But the Seminoles and the Latin American cultures, and that brought me here with that kind of snap. Because it wasn't Miami, and it wasn't overwhelming, and I didn't want my kids there, I wanted them in a place—because I love Florida. Florida, I feel very much, is me. It is, it's the light, it's the smell. I love walking out and breaking out into a sweat when I pick up the paper….

[Laughter]
RN: I love Florida. I love the water, I just… I…

SB: That's terrific.

RN: Yes. And I'm…

SB: We're glad you like it here.

RN: Thank you. And I feel like…

SB: You've achieved so much. Especially in the art world of course.

RN: Well, like I said, it's fun. I'm well suited for this role in the sense that I'm a team player. Because nothing could have been done alone.

SB: But you began a lot—well, for instance, you began the Photography Laureate [Program]. I don't know if I expressed that title correctly…

RN: You did, yes.

SB: But that was major, that was three years ago?

RN: We just selected number five last year.

SB: Oh, congratulations.

RN: Yes.

SB: That's exciting.

RN: Yes, it is…

SB: It's extremely important.

RN: I hope so, thank you. I mean certainly it's intended to be an archive as well, very much in the spirit of what you're doing here. Real documentation of the city, and to hold it and to… It's fun to build something that you hope will evolve. Because it won't ever stay the way it is, because we continue to learn and we change. But you want it to evolve.

SB: Could you tell us about the one percent—well, I'll call it an issue, but it's really a tax levied against…?

RN: Well, not so much of a tax as much as it's an ordinance in the sense that it's pulling off an investment into the facilities…. We have two ordinances. One is for public art and private development. And the other one is for the municipal, the one. And I manage both
of those. The public art we started and both of them came out in 1985. And it's kind of interesting about that. I’m glad you brought that up. Because over, close to 400 cities in the country have public art ordinances.

SB: That's quite a bit.

RN: It's quite a bit…

SB: Wow.

RN: It's quite a bit. And of the 400, roughly 20 percent of those have public art and private development. And those that have public art and private development ordinances, which is again for developers building private structures—ours is just in the central business district. Clearwater and other cities—ours is just in the central business district. Clearwater and other cities, I know Largo as a matter of fact is looking at trying to craft one to go citywide. There are about maybe five or six in the state of Florida that are citywide including Coral Springs and a couple of others. And cities that go—that tend to make it citywide, it's kind of interesting because I took this whole study when we were looking at it for it to go before council. Those cities that are, are more highly educated, which is kind of interesting. I know you're not surprised by that, but more highly educated have a very strong vision and mission in terms of the arts, what they do for their culture, what they do for their society, and really have a vision and a mission about where they're going in the future for it. So it's more plan development. They just have a stronger cohesive plan themselves which is really kind of fascinating. The cities that have public art and private development are the major ones where people want to be.

SB: That's great to hear.

RN: It is, it is. It's Seattle, it's Oakland, it's San Francisco, it's Philadelphia, it's LA, it's New York…

SB: Is one percent… Well first of all, is that accurate?

RN: It's one percent for the municipal, and it's .75 percent….

SB: Okay.

RN: There's a cap on it right now, and there will be a cap. I mean they're looking at revising that and bumping it up, because that cap is still in 1985 dollars. So they're looking at adjusting it so that it matches, you know, the early 20th–21st century. And that should be probably, gosh, I don't know if that's going to happen before council in this—March of 2007 or after.

SB: Is that pretty standard? Across the country?

RN: Yes, one percent is. And it's interesting that there's all sorts of variables. You can
either have half a percent off of everything, which is I know what Hillsborough County is taking a look at. You can have one percent off of some things…. Broward County for instance, actually, a lot of them are moving up. Miami's 1.3 percent, Broward's two percent, Seattle's two percent, San Jose is two percent, so and…

SB: Oh, that's significant, gosh.

RN: It is significant, and it's off of everything. So you do infrastructure projects, you do roads, you do signage, you can do lighting, you can make the whole city really enveloped in art. And that gets back to how much fun it is again to just try to make things happen.

SB: Oh, absolutely. Well, it—I would be very curious historically, who sort of made it happen here in Tampa. This is a little before you.

RN: It was before my time. My understanding, I think—I know Linda Saul-Sena was on the committee at that time. And there was some really good developers. Bank of America was the first sculpture that came out as a matter of fact. And they did it voluntarily. So actually a lot of developers came out and supported that. Sandy Freedman was mayor I believe at that time. So it was a very positive—you can't do it without the developers. And the developers certainly, I think, recognized the value of making a landmark for their structure. And especially when you open up and you realize that it can be functional art as well. And it should have worked for them; it needs to be an asset to their facility. It really should.

SB: What does your day consist of, Robin?

RN: Oh my….

[Laughter]

SB: Not to put you on the spot, but like, just…

RN: An average day?

SB: Because those of us who aren't with you on an average might not even have a clue.

RN: Well, the one thing I love about my job is that I guess there really isn't an average day.

SB: Oh, okay.

RN: But I can put in an average week, okay?

SB: Okay.
RN: In which there might be—or an average quarter, where you're—and I have a wonderful assistant, I must say, and that's Melissa LeBaron. She is fabulous, and she is just—takes on so much and allows this program to develop completely and incredibly (I'm trying to put those words together). But I'm at the gym at 5:30 in the morning…

SB: Okay.

RN: And that helps keep me sane so I can be nice at work.

[Laughs]

SB: And stress free.

RN: Yes.

SB: In advance.

RN: Yes, exactly. Serenity now.

SB: [Laughs]

RN: So I do that and then it's certainly, it's lots of emails, phone calls—which I'm not always the best at returning as quickly as I would like, mostly because I'm just constantly interrupted. Nothing is the same. And then there's various meetings reports that need to get filed out. What I also like doing is vision building, when I need—I know we have a project coming up—is that getting online and finding out… Let's say a site might consist of—whether it's a large wall, they might start with that. Or whether there's a large open space. Well gee, what would work well in that? And it's just starting to find and look at what the building compliments, what the architect kind of sees the vision coming from, and just trying to get an idea about what might work in a space like that. What are the trends? What's the common thread? Where are we going? What would work, what wouldn't? What's the environment like? Who's going to be the user groups? You know, more than pigeons for instance—I mean, is it the citizens? What citizens go there, who's the public, and what would they like to have? What would you know, they like to see? This is just a starter. I don't select. I don't vote. I don't do anything on those committees, that's not my job.

SB: So there's a committee that actually—the members choose…

RN: Absolutely.

SB: …which work.

RN: Absolutely.
SB: But I'm sure they're greatly influenced by your research and your thoughts.

RN: Well, I hope so. I mean it's to bring it in and to give them the best choice. I mean it's really funny, for the most part I really—and I don't mean to sound heartless on this—I don't care what artist gets it.

SB: Okay.

RN: As long as it is good, and as long as it's fair. That's, you know, because they're all so many good ones.

SB: But I would assume you do choose the bevy of artists presented? Or not?

RN: No, we do an open call…

SB: Okay.

RN: …and we really bring that in. And again, primarily, the objective, and this is the toughest challenge sometimes, is just to be fair. And to keep the quality high. And it's so easy to—because I have a lot of artists of course who are friends. And it's so easy to want that artist to get that job…

SB: Sure.

RN: That's just totally inappropriate. And it's irresponsible. And from a public servant perspective, this is where I feel like I really can't do that. You know, you have to be ethical, you've got to be fair, you've got to be best national standards, or else we won't be respected in the field nationally.

SB: Sure.

RN: And we are. I will say that of those 20 percent as I mentioned, of the people who have public art and private development, and of the city—number as a whole of 400—City of Tampa is really regarded in the top 25 percent of that.

SB: That's wonderful, gosh.

RN: And a lot of that—it's because we keep best national practices. We want to do things right. We might not always do things right, but when we find out we haven't, we try to fix it.

SB: How do you know that you stand that high? Is there a body that sort of evaluates?

RN: Yes, it wasn't a formal poll that came out, but I asked.

SB: Okay.
RN: Because of the…

SB: That's good to know!

RN: It is good to know. There is an organization called Public Art Network, and that is really the national body.

SB: Okay.

RN: It is under Americans for the Arts that also is a major organization for the Arts Council as well as for the Arts in Education. They do a lot of that type of—and art in development, that kind of thing.

So it's that organizational body that really sort of sets the standards. And we always, we're in tune with that. We're also on a listserv on it. If we've got a question about a procedure, for instance, what is a very basic arbitrary question, "What is best practice if we're, you know, an artist did an image for us and it's so popular, and we want to use it again? And even though we paid him up front for it for the first time, should we pay him for it again for a reuse fee, and if we do, how much, what is appropriate?" And we throw that out there. And then a lot of people who have experience will kind of send that back in with their averages.

SB: That's very interesting.

RN: Well it gives you a real sense of firm footing that you're doing the right thing. And you know, it's kind of like when you do the right thing, then a lot of things fall into place.

SB: When you put out call for artists, is that a call nationally? Internationally?

RN: It depends, it depends.

SB: Okay.

RN: We never—we'll post it on our website always. They're always posted there. And we will encourage you know, local artists to apply. We do that a lot. But the thing is what I find that's kind of interesting, is that what is local anymore? You know? I mean it seems as though local is…

SB: Global village?

RN: It really is.

[Laughter]

RN: I did that one time and I got an artist [who] worked from New Zealand.
SB: Oh, isn't that great?

RN: And his work was wonderful. He didn't—I mean, I don't know where he is now, but he was here in Florida a lot, has a studio here, so he goes back and forth.

SB: So, you don't necessarily feel that because it's Tampa you want to promote local artists?

RN: Well, we certainly do. As a matter of fact, there is again, the best national standards of that, that more than—I can't remember the exact number off the top of my head—but well over a third of our artists are regional or Tampa artists. So by that average, we're actually a little bit above what the national average is for regional artists.

SB: What would that be? What's the national?

RN: About 20-25 percent.

SB: Okay.

RN: So we're really very good with that. And we're also very good—we're right, we're just…. And again, it's funny how it shakes out, because these are out of national calls, and blind reviews, so you don't even know who you're looking at. But it's interesting, because when you stack up also in terms of gender and cultural difference and race and all that stuff, we are proportionately right in with where our population is too.

SB: That's terrific.

RN: It really is. Because, and that is just…

SB: It's important…

RN: It is important.

SB: …of course, to encourage.

RN: And I love that, it's kind of like, wow, this is great.

SB: Do you find a lot of natural talent tends to stay in the area?

RN: I do, but they don't necessarily care about public art, which is a shame. I mean they don't need…. 

SB: Yes.
RN: You know, and they have other interests and they do other things. I would love to, and I'm wonderfully surprised when I find an artist who is interested in doing public art, and…

SB: I would think they would be very interested, because it's so public!

RN: Well one of the things that I think we would like to do more of, and I know we're in dialogue now with some other partners—potential partners—is teach artists how to apply for public art. Because it is a different animal.

SB: You think that might be dissuading?

RN: I think it seems like a big void and…

SB: Intimidating.

RN: …I understand that. Because it is—I would say it's a mystery to me, but it took a long time to learn.

SB: I would love to get into a discussion about specific pieces of public art—like the chicken.

RN: [laughs]

SB: I don't mean to use the vernacular, but I mean, it's certainly been talked about a lot in the papers.

RN: Yes.

SB: And it would probably be of interest to people.

RN: The Sugarman. I really like that sculpture.

SB: I do too.

[Laughter]

RN: And I know a lot of folks…

SB: I'm offended with all these articles…

RN: Me too.

SB: I think it's valid public art.

RN: I do too.
SB: It's valid art.

RN: I do too. And I think they do it—one, and the reporters, they're usually pretty good folks about it, they really are. And I think you know, they need a story. And their editors make them do things. And I'm sensitive to that. But Sugarman, there's a great—speaking of, you know, oral histories and as such—you should Google his—and you'll find his personal website….

[End Tape 1, Side B]

[Tape 2, Side A]

SB: Today is March 30th, [2007], and I am here with Robin Nigh who has a new title. This is the second in the series of two interviews. But I would like for Robin to tell us her new title.

RN: Thank you Suzette. I’m Manager of Art Programs for the City of Tampa. So that includes a number of programs in addition to the public art programs.

SB: What would that be, Robin?

RN: Well, a number of the programs would include Lights On Tampa, I think, which we spoke of briefly earlier, in addition to public art and private development, and cultural planning or cultural activation for the Riverwalk, and also Zach as an Avenue of the Arts.

SB: Okay.

RN: So those are just a number of projects that are kind of on my plate right now.

SB: Since we've sort of tracked in different areas in these interviews, I would like to explore each of those areas if we could. But first, before we kind of leave your personal aside, which is very interesting to people who don't have the opportunity to get to know you, you did mention that you have two children.

RN: Yes.

SB: Could you tell us their names and…?

RN: Jacob Lee Nigh, he is every bit of a teenager and 13 years old; he loves to fish. And Dylan Scott Nigh is 17 years old, and he is a junior in high school.

SB: And have you exposed them to art?

RN: Ever since they were born, yes. I remember I went for a brief—had a brief job opportunity, I worked briefly in a gallery but it really wasn't my—cut out for me. And I
had Dylan as a baby, he was four months old, and I laid him on a towel in the middle of a gallery. So one thing I can say is since they were born, they felt very, very comfortable in art environments.

SB: That's wonderful.

RN: Mostly, I will say visual arts. They have seen some theatre and some music, but for the most part it's been visual arts.

SB: Do they draw? Is this an interest?

RN: It's something I wish they would do more of, because when they do it's very good. And maybe they'll come back to it. We used to do that a lot. We used to, when they were babies, paint their own t-shirts. I've got pictures of them where they would paint their own clothes. We would do that together, and do real creative things and coloring books and that kind of thing. They also write very good poetry when they put their mind to it. But right now, being two teenage boys…. I will say this—my youngest is also plays the drums, my eldest does guitar. And my youngest is also in band and plays the trumpet. So they're very, very talented and I think one also thing that they have in the house is they're exposed to hundreds of different types of music.

SB: That's terrific.

RN: We play music all the time in the house, and they know everything from country to rap.

SB: Was this part of your philosophy in exposing, not just children to art, but then adults as well?

RN: Absolutely. And we learn from them, it's also—maybe it's my device not to get old or something like that…

[Laughter]

SB: That's good.

RN: …is to hear and be in tune with what they're listening to. It opens up a lot of conversations.

SB: That's terrific.

RN: So it's funny, I remember there was once, my youngest got in the car the other day, and he heard—and I was, I had Gwen Stefani on I think. And he says, "Mom, you're listening to Gwen Stefani?"

[Laughter]
RN: And I said, "Yes." And I turned it up really loud, and made him listen to it all the way with me. It was fun.

SB: Do they have art in school? And to what degree?

RN: You know, my children have not had, since I can remember, an art class in school. Which is really heartbreaking.

SB: That's a while.

RN: It's—well, it is. And it’s heartbreaking. As I mention now, they—one does music. And the other one got into guitar. Honestly I don't think it was—I think he has the skill for it, but he really didn't want to pursue it. It was just something he was curious about and it just didn't take. But I think you do have to have kids—give kids—the opportunity to really explore and find what does take.

SB: Sure.

RN: So you can't say, "Well, no, you didn't get into guitar this time, so no we're not going to go do this this time." So you just have to kind of keep providing them the opportunities.

SB: Well, they're fortunate to have you to give them the opportunities, obviously.

RN: Well thank you. And one thing I…

SB: Not every parent does that.

RN: Thank you Suzette. Because we really, you know, of course that's what a parent's—every parent's angst is to make sure that you—you want to do the best you can and do the right thing. And I worked with a member in Tallahassee, I know it was a very unusual event for Tallahassee, but it was even stranger for my children. Ever since we did a performance art piece—a contemporary Native American performance art piece, and my kids were just right in the middle of it. And they…

SB: That's terrific.

RN: As a matter of fact, my husband was conscripted to be part of the performance art piece. He was "the man."

[Laughter]

SB: That's great.

RN: It was fun.
SB: That's wonderful.

RN: And they just feel very comfortable in those environments now which is nice.

SB: In my interaction with you, with the public spaces, the performances, all of the interaction you do on behalf of the city, I do get the feeling that you're very family oriented.

RN: Yes.

SB: And if you, perhaps you would want to share how that comes into play in your program?

RN: Thank you, because it is very much sewn in, but all of the programs, particularly Lights on Tampa, is one that is very much centered on the family. It is out to be fun, free, and for families. One of the things that we want to do for the Riverwalk for instance also, is that you can—which again, you can thread fun, free, and families, and put fitness in there too. And that doesn't mean that it cannot be through the arts. I mean, I kind of see the arts as a basic palette, like a foundation of a building in which all things can be built off of. And there's handles there that should be made available for each person to find their own hook, their own handle, their own point of contact that's going to really trick them into more interest, and really kind of bring them along.

SB: Could you get into some specifics via the actual programs you supervise?

RN: Sure. One of the things that we're looking at, for—and it's also we, one of the things I'm going to back up to say… In building these programs that we try to put together, we really look for it to be win-win of all the organizations that we bring into be involved…so the various cultural institutions for instance, the artists themselves, the city, and most of all, the citizens. To really try to make it engaging and active and make it grow. I mean, I do, as I mentioned, will have various types of music in the car that I don't necessarily wouldn't have picked it out on—of course I did pick it out on my own, how do I say this?

SB: [Laughs]

RN: I wouldn’t have necessarily thought that it would have been a favorite. But I want to expose myself because I want to grow. And I think you've got to do that. And so we want to build a palette in some of our programming, with some of our programming, so that you're exposing opportunities where people can grow. Not everybody for instance is going to like everything that we do in public art. We know that and we hope to heavens that's the truth in many cases, because you don't want everybody to love everything, because it means you're all the same.

SB: So true.
RN: And that's not what we're about. So to have a forum for dialogue is kind of the agenda. One of the things for instance as I mentioned is the fitness and the arts. One of the things that you could do for instance is just even have misters along the Riverwalk that are artfully designed that would cool you as you moved through an exercise in the space. So there's ways that art could be blended throughout the entire fabric of it.

SB: So the Riverwalk is part of your constituency?

RN: The cultural component of it, yes. Really not the mortar and concrete, but the activation of it.

SB: What will that entail?

RN: Well, one of the things again—the common thread that we're looking at from that, and a lot of what I like to try to do is kind of figure out—you can never say what people are looking for, but you can try to find what a common denominator is and start from there. With the Riverwalk for instance, one of the things that really struck me is that I didn't want it to be this row of plop art.

SB: What is that? "Plop art?"

RN: Plop art is something that's just basically stuck there.

SB: Oh, okay.

RN: It's just a piece of art that comes and lands. It's really funny. One artist I worked with in Chicago gave me this great quote one time. He says, "Art isn't from aliens, it doesn't just drop out of the sky!"

[Laughter]

RN: But you want a cohesive design, and you want it activated. And a reason why people come back. So the common denominator between Zach and the Riverwalk and Lights on Tampa is to make it a place where people want to be. And you do that by letting people bring their own meaning to it. Not necessarily making a narrative for them that can be construed as static, but building an environment that is dynamic, that changes, that's again, fluid enough so that also the public can bring their own meaning to it.

And one of the things that really struck me with the Riverwalk is that it's really the environment that frames it all. It kind of sticks us all together. It's the light; it's why people came here in the first place. It's the springs, it's the water, it's something that's these intangibles. And how do you—that's a very exciting and wonderful challenge, is that, here's the palette, and so you give this to an artist to say, how do you put this together so that it's engaging and inviting and hits all those notes?

SB: The Riverwalk covers from where to where? Or will that change?
RN: It is 2.2 miles. It is from Beneficial Bridge, which is just north of the Aquarium, and it goes all the way up to Tampa Heights new development now that they're working on called The Heights there.

SB: And will public art be periodically placed along that whole space?

RN: Yes, yes. And we're not exactly sure what the plan is, but what we're looking at doing, working out new partnerships for instance with various health groups we're looking at working on. We also want it to be completely again—fun, free for families, fitness; we want it to be entertaining, educational, environmental. We're also looking at developing a solar package. There's a real functional way….

SB: What is that?

RN: For instance, you can have all the bridge—we want the bridges lit down there so it's—we scream to light the bridges.

SB: Cannot wait.

RN: So you light the bridges, and there's probably a way that we can creatively light them through solar technologies and tie them, the whole Riverwalk light component together so it's unified lighting package. And it's really nice. One thing I will say, I have to just—think it's wonderful in this administration is the sense that it's an opportunity for us all to work together. The hardest thing I can possibly—or the challenging I should say, the most challenging—is when you have so many departments doing so many things is making communication consistent. And making that crossover communication and interfacing with the community, and making sure everybody knows what's going on is extremely challenging. You'd hate to lose the opportunity and then realize the door was closed before you even knew it was open.

SB: Sure.

RN: And that's happened.

SB: Do you have specific plans for this specific component of your job?

RN: Not yet, not yet.

SB: I realize it's new and it's evolving…

RN: No, I….

SB: The Riverwalk project period is new.
RN: Right, you're absolutely right. The Riverwalk project is evolving. I sketched out a preliminary plan in which the mayor signed off on in approval, and there's a company called EDAU, which is one of the developers—not developers but the landscape architects and planners working with the Riverwalk to sketch out this plan. But the next step will be, when they come back with some of their most bare bone specifics from these core recommendations, is getting it out into the community. We want to have meetings with each of the cultural institutions to see what their needs are. But what would be really nice for instance is to have this whole kind of cross fertilization of the cultural institutions. For instance, have the Performing Arts Center, who has their acts so well together and does so much down there at their end, it would be great to have Elphaba who, as you know, as an arbitrary example—one of the major characters from… The company with the play… I saw it!

[Laughter]

SB: So have I!

[Laughter]

RN: I saw it! And I read the book!

[Laughter]

SB: Oh well!

RN: *Wicked*!

SB: Okay.

RN: *Wicked*.

SB: Thank you.

RN: Having some of the theatrical characters down at the Marriot. I mean wouldn't that…

SB: Oh, how fun!

RN: …be wonderful to engage it and activate.

SB: How fun.

RN: What a draw that would be.

SB: Sure.
RN: And having some of the character actors from H.B. Plant Museum. Teddy Roosevelt and Edison come to life and be down the Riverwalk.

SB: That'd be great.

SB: I think it's Elphaba.

RN: Elphaba, that's right.

SB: Which is why I didn't, kind of recognize it.

RN: Thank you. All that time when I read the book I was reading it wrong!

SB: Oh my gosh!

[Laughter]

SB: It's a wonderful show.

RN: It was.

SB: But that would be incredibly popular.

RN: It really…

SB: It'd be an exciting…

RN: Well, and…

SB: …happening!

RN: Exactly. So it's an outreach opportunity for those organizations, and that's where—I just, you know, you want to make it come alive.

SB: Well I'm very encouraged hearing these plans.

RN: Thank you.

SB: I have to say.

RN: Well we just have to make it happen.

SB: Well, that's that component. Now, you mentioned two others, of course public art—Lights On [Tampa]…

RN: Lights On.
SB: Let's talk about those.

RN: Lights On?

SB: Yes please.

RN: Lights On is very exciting. We're just getting started on working up to 2009. This will be our second program. It is a beast.

SB: [Laughs]

RN: It is a massive organization, I must say. I'm very pleased with its reception. And….

SB: Tell us about what happened this past year.

RN: In January…

SB: For people, you know, that we don't know.

RN: Okay thank you. In January of 2006, we opened up our first Lights On Tampa. Something we hoped to be a biannual. It is a public private partnership in which we really bring artistic—free access to artistic excellence. So, we have an open call to artists, we have some wonderful jurors come. And the jurors help us prioritize artists and coordinating them with sites. So it has to be very fluid obviously in terms of trying to match an artist to a site when there's lots of personalities involved in addition to logistics, and just the core pragmatics of what the artist does and how well it would work at their site and so on. So there's all kinds of issues with that.

SB: How many artists were there?

RN: There were a total of eight. And I will say, hindsight is 20/20 as you know. I would not do the staggered roll out again like we did this time. As we will—January 10, 2009, it will, whatever we have, will be on…that night.

SB: All at one time?

RN: All at one time. And that is the year of the Super Bowl. So we're hoping that also the intent here obviously is that we will be a presence for—again because of the visibility of Superbowl obviously, that the arts will really have a very high level profile.

SB: That's terrific.

RN: Yes.

SB: Sounds exciting. How would you evaluate the first Lights On?
RN: Well, we learned lessons. It was—first of all, it was a wonderful success. We could not have done anymore physically. And that was good. It was good to do something and do it well. There's some nuts and bolts that we learned in terms of contractual things that we—real pragmatic administrative things how to do better. And…

SB: Could you talk about the individual artists in the projects?

RN: Oh, absolutely.

SB: That would be great.

RN: The first artist was—well, I'll just try to go down the list.

SB: Okay.

RN: Mentally I'm walking down…

SB: Okay.

RN: I'm walking down the street…

SB: Good.

RN: …and I'll start with Jorge Orta, on that side of the river. Jorge Orta is an Argentinean born, but French artist. And he does these wonderful workshops within the community, and he really does the artwork about the space, what gives it meaning, the site, and so on. And he likes to work with historic sites. And he likes to really envelop that site with imagery that kind of tells the visual history among other things about that site. In this particular case, he chose the University of Tampa's beautiful Plant Hall, of course. And had rolling images across the façade of that. It was very interesting because people—it was wonderful for me to see it, and I think at one point I almost cried because it was like this grandmother with her grandchild. I'm literally jumping in the light, and I thought, “They get it!” Because that's what you were supposed to do is get in there and experience it.

SB: It was night?

RN: It was night. The coldest night of the year.

SB: Oh, I didn't realize.

RN: Yes.

SB: I was so inspired by the production.
RN: It was wonderful. And it was…

SB: And it really was a production.

RN: It was. They were these light cannons that he shipped in from Canada to do that. And he built scaffolding for it. And just a little behind the scenes on that, working with UT [University of Tampa] there were just a lot of agencies that needed to be involved in that contract. And of course we had a language issue because he doesn't speak English.

SB: Oh no.

RN: But he prefers French and Spanish. And we managed just fine because everybody was very welcoming and there were certainly enough bilingual people around to help us out with that. A wonderful person.

SB: It was just the one night?

RN: Yes.

SB: And how long did that last? How long were the images projected over the filigree of Plant Hall?

RN: I think he started—it was about four or five hours.

SB: Oh, okay.

RN: It was a loop.

SB: Okay. That just kept winding.

RN: Yes. And it was funny. I will say this, that there were some people, and we were very much afraid of criticism because [of] spending public dollars for something like it. This once in a lifetime experience is a bad thing for public dollars to go towards. And my argument for that is what do you…. I mean, fire works—and this was a very different type of cultural experience. And one of the things I think that is our responsibility to do is to expose the public to new forms. Whether they choose to participate in that or not, that is issues obviously of choice and privilege and all of that. But it's our responsibility to push the envelope.

SB: It was very well attended.

RN: It was.

SB: It really was spectacular.

RN: We had a traffic jam downtown.

RN: It was.

SB: And that was the first image that was presented as part of Lights On.

RN: Yes, yes.

SB: Okay.

RN: Well actually, the mayor—the first one where the light switch excuse me, was flipped was in front of City Hall.

SB: Oh? Okay.

RN: And that artist was Stephen Knapp, K-N-A-P-P. Stephen did an excellent job. And again I want to say another example, one of the fringe benefits that you get when you bring in a wonderfully capable and professional artist is that helps your program far more than you can possibly imagine. Stephen really needed—the city absolutely needed to partner with him to make his project happen. Among other things, what he's doing is literally drilling holes into City Hall.

SB: And it's permanent?

RN: And it's permanent. And he was extremely professional in the sense that he had a template…. He was working with our crew, our facilities people who aren't artists. But they're really, really nice guys, and they were very open. And they realized the seriousness of what—how what he was doing was cool, it was interesting, it was serious.

SB: Could you describe what he did?

RN: It is a constellation is I guess a good word to it. It's a series of clusters of glass that are affixed to the outside of the building so that it's—diachronic safety glass. When the light hits it, it kind of looks like little starbursts over the building.

SB: It sure does.

RN: And it really works very, very well.

SB: It's beautiful.

RN: Yes. We haven't had any problems with it; it's been very, very nice.

SB: Wonderful!
RN: Yes.

SB: And it's permanent.

RN: And it's permanent. And that's where the switch was flipped by the mayor. And then there was a trolley that started at the other side. So then I believe the next site was the Performing Arts Center.

Tobey Archer, out of South Florida was the artist for that. And it's kind of a wonderful piece in the sense that it's this pulsating fiber optic that lines the rim of the building. I like to think of it as that the building is essentially almost performing too. I mean it's a great…

SB: Oh, that's great!

RN: It really kind of is.

SB: That's wonderful.

RN: And the name of that piece is “Marquee.”

SB: And it changes colors.

RN: It changes colors.

SB: As it pulses through there.

RN: It's very subtle. I love how it wraps the entire building, and it also compliments—which is again, I want to stress what public art can do, is really work well with existing. And that is a great example—that and City Hall actually—are great examples of how light can transform, and how also public art can enhance an existing building. That worked very well.

Then there was also Erwin Redl at the—he did a marvelous installation called "Fade" in the cubes at the corner of Kennedy and Ashley. And that almost again made the building seem like it was breathing where you had a series of lights, of LED, it was almost an LED curtain that would pulsate and turn from blue—almost a real visceral red to an ice blue. So it was a wonderful transition. And I liked it so much because you're in it, and you're actually in it! You're enveloped with color.

SB: On the inside of the building.

RN: Yes.

SB: Literally you could see the colors. And…
RN: Yes.

SB: …as well as the outside…

RN: Yes.

SB: …of the building.

RN: And when you were in the building….

SB: And it was the whole side of the building.

RN: Absolutely. You could see it from the interstate.

SB: Oh my goodness.

RN: It was wonderful. It was so good.

SB: It was very dramatic.

RN: It really was. And it just was, like heartbeat. And I really had a great response to that.

SB: Good.

RN: So that was very good. We also had Janet Echelman at the Poe Garage. And she is actually was…. She came a little later because the repairs on the garage delayed, so that we just couldn't get it quite together on time. But actually that worked out real well, because her work is temporary as was Erwin Redl's regretfully. Erwin's was a year. Janet's was six months, and hers is called "Line Drawing." And it's really wonderful; it's kind of a kinetic piece that slips down, all the way down the throat of the Poe Garage, which is again right along the river. And it's really funny hearing the feedback of so many of the installations because I'm finding that—and I can't, I'd love a wider poll on it—young people really, really like that piece.

SB: Really.

RN: Yes, like they're…

SB: Do you have emails or letters or…

RN: I do and…

SB: …word of mouth?
RN: From a number of word of mouth experiences. And then also from the museum, some other education classes…

SB: Oh sure, of course.

RN: …what they hear and what they found out.

SB: It's right there.

RN: So the young ones really like her piece.

SB: Isn't that wonderful!

RN: It's fascinating, it truly is.

SB: That's great.

RN: Which makes me think again that…

SB: Well, it's red, which is a vibrant color.

RN: Yes.

SB: It's very imaginative, you can visualize different shapes.

RN: And it's a cavernous space, so you can also get out there and you can run up and down it when there's no cars. And you can certainly do that on the weekend. And it's just fun, because you can just look at it from different—from being here and being over….

SB: And just for the listener to on the tape to know, they look like nets, giant, giant nets. Well, here I shouldn't interject …

RN: No, no you're right.

SB: …but the shadows at night are just so interesting!

RN: That's what she was after. That's exactly it. And I really love it, because—the intent in all of these projects is that it's something for everyone. They're all so very different. And I have to really tip my hat to the jury who helped us select these artists and give us a real balance, a balance palette, which was very good.

SB: That's terrific.

RN: It was. I'm trying to think, there's Jeff Whipple was also a local artist. I know who else I wanted to say, Jeff Whipple and Wendy Babcox. I'll throw both those names out now because they were both local artists, which was great. Wendy Babcox did an
outstanding piece of rear view video projection. It was very popular…of mermaids—it was really the lushness of the area that she really played off of. Very indigenous of fish and mermaids and…

SB: Is this the one in the building?

RN: Yes, the…

SB: One of the…

RN: The corner, yes.

SB: Where the…

RN: Yes.

SB: …a corner.

RN: Yes.

SB: And it looked like an aquarium.

RN: It did! And I love these kind of funny stories.

SB: [Laughs]

RN: One lady went around the block, and trust me, downtown Tampa, it's not easy to go down the block on that corner!

[Laughter]

RN: And she thought, "Is there an aquarium here?"

SB: Brand new, overnight!

[Laughter]

RN: And I thought that was really funny.

SB: It was attention-grabbing.

RN: Yes.

SB: I saw many, many people just stunned really by the…
RN: It made me very nervous. My stepfather-in-law came down and he's out on the street taking pictures, and I'm thinking just, "Please, we're not very pedestrian-friendly here yet!"

[Laughter]

RN: I want him to be safe!

SB: I found the location very appropriate, because traffic is all there. You really have to see it.

RN: We were very nervous about that one because, obviously—just for that very reason because of traffic. That artist again, a little background information, is that artist was originally was placed on the [Tampa] Tribune Building, but for various reasons the Tribune was thinking that they were looking for a different type of a project. So we were looking—and not to mention, Wendy on that site—the equipment would be very different than the equipment that she needed for the site that she ended up at. And the difference in that equipment was also about $75,000. So we ended up actually with another project, moving Wendy over there which was great. So it was a very exciting way—and one of the things that I think makes programs successful is you need to be fluid, and you need to be able to breathe with it and not be so rigid.

SB: Sure.

RN: You need guidelines so you have very good structure and you keep the integrity of your program, but also fluid enough so that changes can happen as they need to. And…

SB: Makes sense.

RN: And we were very successful.

SB: Well, what did go up on the Tribune Building?

RN: That was a lighting company that worked on that. That was BayStage Lighting. And it was choreographed. It's very interesting in the sense that it played music….

[End Tape 2, Side A]

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[Tape 2, Side B]

SB: Robin I know that you wanted to talk about the 2009 Lights On. So let's do it.

RN: Thank you. We're just starting, the call to artists is out now. That…

[Tape paused]
SB: Go ahead.

RN: The call to artists has released that—just a little statistic to give you an idea on how popular this program is—on average we receive 90 hits per day on our Lights On Tampa website.

SB: Wow!

RN: That's, you know, lightsontampa.org…

SB: That's a lot.

RN: And that again ties into how our structure is, but I'll get back to that in a moment. Since the call to artists has been out we're getting hits of over 2000 per day.

SB: My gosh! All of them artists?

RN: Well, I don't know. I don't know. Because I also receive inquiries from all over the country, and asking about structure, and how we do it…

SB: Okay.

RN: …And this type of thing. Because it is a very, very unique program. And one of the things that makes it so unique is that it's a public/private partnership. For Lights on Tampa 2006, for instance, the private sector funded 75% of the program.

SB: That's significant.

RN: And that was roughly about a million dollar budget totally. Now I’m including in-kind on that as well. The city funded, well, the city funded—anteed up about $225,000 [thousand] in cash, and that's not including in-kind, which is, of course, police and trash pickup and road closures and cones and all that stuff that cities do. Now for Lights On 2009, we're again in that very fluid process where you have to kind of keep two balls in the air at the same time, and then you'll start maneuvering it in kind of—it will start to settle out in terms of what sites really do happen. A lot of expressed interest…. The jury will be in town in May of this year, May 24 we should have the jury help us prioritize the artists. And then what we'll start to do is have the artists come to town, meet a potential site, and then start coming up with ideas and budgets, and working from there.

SB: Do you have any idea how many artists you will involve?

RN: Well, we certainly will do more than what we did last time I think. It's always contingent on money.

SB: Of course.
RN: It really is, of course it’s budget driven. But we anticipate to have six or seven—well, more than six. The list right now is about ten to fifteen, honestly we'll see if that happens. We're cautiously optimistic that raising funds may not be so challenging as it was last time. One of the sites we would of course love to do, and I can just only imagine how complicated this contract will be—and that's Raymond James Stadium.

SB: Oh, a great space.

RN: Well, it's a great magnet, and obviously it will be visible, it will be seen nationally, internationally. It's…

SB: Did we mention it's the time of the Super Bowl?

RN: No, I don't think we did, thank you, you're absolutely right. It is the time of the Super Bowl, and the other thing that it really drives home the point of the city as art. It's not separate you don’t have to have the art just here in one place. And you don’t have to have it here, but you're mixing a wonderful group of user groups. And it frequently also, it's the stereotype that sports people don't go into the arts. And, Suzette I know you're familiar with the economic study that the Business Committee for the Arts did, really showing that arts, user groups are significantly higher…

SB: Absolutely.

RN: …in terms of dollars that they bring in.

SB: Yes.

RN: And I don't want to present that this is an either/or, simply that is in addition too, it's an "and"…

SB: Sure.

RN: …it's inclusive, it's together. And we all are on the same team. So if Tampa, I don't have any doubt whatsoever can be this glowing beacon…

SB: I love it! [Laughs]

RN: That when the Blue Angels fly over, they'll see it, and they'll say, "Oh, this must be Tampa."

SB: That's a great image to present.

RN: I have no doubt we can make that happen.
SB: It's wonderful. Tell me about the jury. You've mentioned them a couple of times. Who are these people?

RN: The jury is really the bones of this. I mean, we can hang the rest of the skeleton together, but the jury is the bones to help us keep the integrity of the program together. Last year's jury was outstanding, or our, excuse me, our 2006 jury. This jury for 2009 are three individuals. We have Dave Hickey who is a creative writer and art critic out of Las Vegas. Jerry Saltz who is a writer for—also I should mention—let me go back on Dave Hickey for a moment. He's won the Genius Award for the MacArthur Grant, Genius Award. Jerry Saltz [is a] two times Pulitzer Prize…

[Tape paused]
RN: Jerry Saltz, two times Pulitzer Prize nominee, and he's also art critic for Village Voice. And then there is Anne Pasternak who is the Director of Creative Time, and that is a non-profit organization very similar in structure, except it's not a public/private. But it seeks to bring challenging art into the public realm. And so she also has a very large visual vocabulary in terms of artists who would work and can work and so on. So it's a really stellar jury. And we will be bringing in these individuals again to help us take a look at the call—the applicants, help us put it together, and then from there we really start building our partnerships.

SB: Excellent.

RN: With sites and organizations, we should have a meeting soon with potential sponsors, just so they know where we're at, kind of get everybody an update. We might seem to be quiet, but now is the time that things are really happening.

SB: I see. Does it really take two years to plan?

RN: Oh….

SB: Easily, I'm sure.

RN: I'm having heart failure now!

SB: Oh, no!

RN: And the reason being, I'll tell you, is because you want this to be bigger, especially when you start looking at something like Raymond James Stadium as a for instance, is—backing that up from the art installation to the contract development…

[Tape paused]

RN: Yes, there is a concern now because of backing out the project. It is two years and that might seem like a long time. But when you think, start backing it out from your, let's see, drop-dead date of January 10th, you—what goes [and] proceeds that is an installation
time. What precedes that—and that, by the way, can take weeks or days, or hopefully heavens, not months. Before that is fabrication time. You don't know how long the artists are going to have to take to make it. Before that is design; before that is the contract; before that, you have to have the money to do it all.

SB: Yes, sure.

RN: So you really can't do it until you have the money, and you have to have the money at least 18 months, you know, so you can do it so that everybody else has time to get their other components in place. And then while all that—you have a quiet phase while installation is going because things are under contract and things are perking along, and then you work on your PR, your press, your articles, and you start to make sure that you've got all your connections and your events and so on. So it's very fluid, and I keep, I know I keep going back to that term, but it really is the best term to describe it, it's kind of like a dance.

SB: It's organic.

RN: It really is.

SB: Who are some of the companies, and I assume that it's mostly companies who comprise the private?

RN: We had some major sponsors that I have to say, without a doubt, would have not been made possible. One I have to say is Verizon has… and Alan Ciamporcero in particular was a real driving force, and not only just being our chairman, but in a visionary of how this can work and pulling it together.

SB: That's true.

RN: And this is one thing I will say, is that it's been such a privilege to work with such individuals as Alan, Peter Hobson with Pepin Distributing is another one. Because there's just synergy and such vision. And it was really like, working with them was like a game of pick-up basketball, and that's not my analogy, that's Peter's. Where we would all work together, and whoever had the strong suit, who could ever carry that game would take the ball for that particular set. There was also Met-Life, so we had a lot of national companies involved with that. And we had Sweetbay as well. Those were several of our major sponsors. And everyone was important—the Tribune I have to say was hugely important. We have statistics, that just the advertising alone that they gave us—the TV ads alone, not even mentioning the press, went into over two million viewers…

SB: Oh my goodness!

RN: …or two million homes.

SB: Wow.
RN: Really. And they were extremely kind and generous. It really is a community effort, and that's one thing I like about it so much is because it's not a typical bureaucratic program at all. It's driven largely, hugely by the private sector.

SB: That's very encouraging.

RN: It really is.

SB: This is not uncommon I take it. This is being done all over the country.

RN: Actually it is uncommon.

SB: Okay.

RN: Coming out of a government agency, this type of a public/private partnership is really kind of unusual. It's a shared vision I think. There are lots of nonprofits who will do something like this. But coming out of a government office is a bit unusual. And I understand that because it's challenging. There are challenges that we have internally. We are a pain in the neck, because… [Laughs]… And I understand and I respect that too. But I'm just saying our process, in terms of moving something through budget and then through council, and then the resolution, and then you get the mayor to sign it, and then you have to…

SB: That's major.

RN: It's a long, it's a slow process, but that's what government process is. But to do that and make it work is really wonderful.

SB: Well speaking of government processes, the area that we didn't touch on is where you really began and what brought you to Tampa. Public art?

RN: Yes.

SB: Could you elaborate on your job and what you do…

RN: Well…

SB: In that part?

RN: Thank you. Public art, I guess I would have to start off, and I thought about this on the way over here, is that gee whiz, could I define public art? And I don't know that I can because—oh, actually I think that's in part of the first part of the interview, because it is so fluid and organic, and it's alive like a city is. So I think it changes and we need to be prepared to do that. Like literature in many ways, and text and how that changes.
SB: How many piece of public art have...

RN: Do we have?

SB: Yes. Because you really began our program, did you not?

RN: No I did not. The program actually began in '85. Since I've been here, I've more than doubled the collection.

SB: Oh, okay.

RN: I've done that, and—gosh...

SB: And again, to review—you began, what year?

RN: '99.


RN: January of '99.

SB: Alright.

RN: And we've streamlined the process a lot. When I started in 1999, first thing we did—and I can't take credit for this, because the public art committee had already started it. I was just allowed to get in there and shape it and help finish it. And that is, guidelines, which I can't stress enough. We do have procedures that again, can change and evolve as best practices are improved and are involved and so on. And so I will say that with a great deal of pride, is that what we really try to maintain are best practices throughout the country. And that goes back—I know I said something earlier in the last interview that I didn't care what artist was selected. And really, what I meant by that was that as long—we want it to be fair, and we want it to be good. We want it to be the best possible artist, and the best possible project for that site and for that community. And that's really what our job is to try to do, is to be fair, and help facilitate, and help pull it together in many ways. It is a messy process in many ways, but it has proven to work very well. I shouldn’t say messy, it's slow. And it's cumbersome. But it works very, very well...

[Tape paused]

SB: Robin, we talked before about the division of the allocation that goes towards public art. Could you expand on that in terms of the user groups in…?

RN: Yes. One of the things that we try to do for instance, I mean some is real—pretty much straightforward. If there's a community center that is being built, and funds are generated from the ordinance for that site, we will do public art for that site. Same with the police station for instance. But there's also a provision in the ordinance that we have
that's a real plus also, in the sense that we have the ability to pool funds. What that means is that if a wastewater plant that the public really doesn't go to is being built, we can take the funds that are generated from the ordinance for that and put it toward something else. Now we were able to do that for instance at College Hill Community Center in East Tampa. We added an additional—I mean, that project, there was a $30,000 terrazzo floor, which is phenomenally gorgeous, it's beautiful. The artist came in, met with community folks, really did a fantastic job. And it would have been half of what it is were it not for us able to pool funds and add additional dollars to it so that the artist had enough to work with to make it a real substantive project.

And there's really lots of ways how that kind of happens. Because there's different communities, and I think we need to be responsive to that, is that, "What is the notion of the public?" And one of the things that I read one time that was really fascinating was that sometimes you have people trying to hijack definitions. Like, “Who owns the definition of 'family?'” Who owns the definition of 'community?'” Who owns what that level of interpretation is?”

Well, when you think about communities, there are so many. It's so multivalent. Again, what's the definition of a family now? Likewise, with communities, when we are out there, we try to be really sensitive to…. There's skateboard community, that's a community. There's different types. There's the geriatric sect community, there's the silver sneakers that are at the Y[YMCA]. So it's being responsive to the different types of people and how they move through space, and who might encounter it, and appreciate it, and use it and respond to it the most.

We, you know, getting back to some of the things with Lights On Tampa, we can't be all things to all people. But we try to have something for everyone. And that's really the mantra that it's taken years to kind of come to terms with and develop.

SB: Did the artists potentially interview some of the clients who will be using the venue?

RN: Absolutely, absolutely. The artist always should. Now what's interesting is that when you're in a very public space, the Performing Arts Center is a good example, and when we do art at the convention center, which is on the work plan for this coming year, that's another case in which you really want to hear the feedback from those who use the space most often. They know it the most intimately. They have response and feedback. Of course those that are visitors too. But who really know how the visitors respond most frequently are the people who are there everyday.

SB: Sure.

RN: So they really have the…

SB: Plus, they look at it everyday.

RN: They have to live with it, literally.
SB: Sure.

RN: So you want to be sensitive to that.

SB: You mentioned the convention center. Are they now qualified to get an art piece due to expansion?

RN: No, what we're finding—one of the things that are... Well first of all, there is designated sites for Lights on Tampa. So we'd love to help them find a sponsor for their site. They and the public—because it's a city project, or city site, the public art may designate funds for there as well. So that will be one of our creative funding sources where we pull a lot together to try to do a significant project there.

SB: Could you—you gave a figure of $30,000 for the one art piece. Could you give us a sampling of costs for some of—and be specific if you could, for instance, the chicken or…

RN: Absolutely.

SB: …any of the others?

RN: The Sugarman piece is not ours. That one as you know—but that cost, they did that voluntarily, they being the developer. And they did it prior to…

SB: They did it without the committee, the public art [committee].

RN: Yes.

SB: Okay.

RN: And they did it in anticipation of the public art and private development coordinates.

SB: I see.

RN: So that one's a little odd, but that was—they got a bargain, I think. Because it was less, I think it was $185,000 dollars is what I want to say to it.

SB: Wow, that is a great deal.

RN: Yes, it was a great deal. Let's see what else in terms of numbers if I can just remember them.

SB: Just general of course.
RN: Well, our average project—oh, I know…. We have another artist who's doing a project in East Tampa. His name is Charles Humes. He's out of South Florida, and he's coming up and he wants to work—he wants to actually live in the community for about two weeks or two—while, he's working on the installation and really get to know the community, because he wants the community to buy into what he's doing. He's already had a community meeting with them there, and spoken with them. And it's really wonderful because it's also integrated with the architecture really well. So it'll be a nice holistic design because the building's getting built. And that's building a consensus not only with the committee that is helping him with some of the in-kind things: the site, the background, that kind of thing but also getting him the contacts within the community, opening the doors for him so he can interface like he wants to do. That project is about $70,000. It's actually it's going to end up being more than that, because TIF dollars, which is tax-increment-funding is helping to pay for some of the foundation work. Because at the end of that is going to be a memorial to African American fire—excuse, police and fire [fighters]. So again, creative ways of pulling it together. Which is nice.

Another project that we're doing a call to artists will be out next week I think, and that is for a mural at McFarland park, to celebrate the Hispanic Heritage. It's part of—we're doing this in celebration of Arte [Tampa Bay’s Festival of the Americas]. And that commission I think is $15,000.

SB: So it's quite a wide—

RN: Quite a wide range.

SB: —range.

RN: We've had everything from, $8800 was our low end, and I think our high end was $250 [thousand]. Something like that. And that's just straight commission out of it, that's not the in-kind that sometimes comes with it.

SB: What project would that be?

RN: That one is not built yet, and that is the project for Cotanchobee, the memorial to the Seminole Wars of Removal. We have an artist who is under contract there. And fortunately that artist and I don't mean it to—any dismissal of the artist…. Fortunately he's been stalled due to the price of steel. Well sometimes good things do happen out of these things because the park has since been extended by another third, so it's being reconfigured. So where his memorial was originally—not his memorial, but his sculpture—was originally going now will be much stronger than where it was going. It will be much stronger where it… You know what I’m trying to say.

SB: Where is this exactly?

RN: Cotanchobee Park. Which is right on the river. It's behind the Forum, and just…
SB: So it will be very visible?

RN: Very visible, just north of the Marriot.

SB: Terrific.

RN: And it will be right—and where the new history center is going. And that's what's causing this reconfiguration. So again, we'll end up—and the artist is actually, his ideas, which is kind of interesting, kind of nice to see too, is that his whole concept has evolved since his initial proposal, so he's asked to redesign it anyway. So it works much much, much better…

SB: Wonderful.

RN: It really works, well. So that's, sometimes synergy works.

SB: That's great.

RN: Yes.

SB: You mentioned before you had some stories to share. And I wonder if you would do that?

RN: Well, [I] will say one thing I do love about my job, is that even the extension you know, with all these other projects and these other programs are wonderful. But there is never one day that's the same.

SB: That's terrific. [Laughs]

RN: There is never one day that's the same.

SB: I'm assuming that's good in your mind! [Laughs]

RN: It is good. There's not been one artist, one contract, one installation that has not been the same.

One story I think is very funny—and I mean, again, I—it's also one of my favorite projects, so I can still, I can say this. And it's with Bud Lee and Port Tampa. Bud and his, what he did was really brilliant. And this is—he canvassed the community and he was photographing them. And then ultimately what we did is we were going to put them in the façade of the building in a window installation. Not unlike—I mean it works so beautifully, just like stained glass was what they did in churches, which were equally also community centers in many ways in their day, in medieval days. Well, the community center here, it's just a different spin on a process. And so he had actually images of the community reflecting out on themselves. It's great! And working with Bud is just a hoot anyway. And I'll never forget, I mean, and I am very responsible and I have all these
varied invoices I have to process and then budgets and all of that kind of thing. And Bud comes in, says, “Robin,” he just got his first check, and it was supposed to go, the money to go for fabrication. "I went to go see my mom this weekend up in New York," he says, "Thanks Robin!"

[Laughter]

RN: That's to get the project done! I mean, it happened, he did it fine. And it all worked out. And it's still a favorite. And what I have to say is a chuckle, is that at the dedication, the one cranky voice that we heard is people were wondering why they weren't in it. And that…

SB: Could you describe that a little more?

RN: Sure, it's photographs of the community, just landmarks, of very familiar places, of… One is a lady standing on a church door. One is an older gentleman eating lunch with, you know… Just very normal things.

SB: That's great.

RN: And a little girl with a baseball cap on. It's just…

SB: It's like a montage of all the photographs?

RN: Well, yes, they're each in different…

SB: Where are they placed?

RN: Right above the door in this kind of abandoned window. He actually did two community centers that way. And they are so well received.

SB: How wonderful.

RN: And that just makes your heart feel so good.

SB: Well, yes, sure.

RN: When people just think, "Well, that's really cool."

SB: Well, that's public art.

RN: That's public art.


RN: You hear cranky things too sometimes, but you know, that's public art too.
SB: Sure.

RN: And we've been real fortunate in that. And we try to again, keep best practices, and you don't have a whole lot of that when you do it right.

SB: Well, you, I mean you're leaving quite a legacy, Robin; I can't begin to tell you in a way how envious—because, it's just terrific.

RN: Well, thank you.

SB: Everywhere you look in Tampa you do see a piece of public art. And at least half of them, according to what you just said are what you've been responsible for. It's amazing.

RN: Well it's—thank you Suzette, it's a team though. I mean I have to say. There's just so many wonderful people out there that make it all possible. It's a good committee; I have to say we also have a great relationship with Public Works. One example, on the terrazzo floor at College Hill, they put into the bid documents going out—we were able to get rolled right into the design process. They recessed the floor so we didn't have to, and that saved us thousands of dollars.

SB: Wow, that's great.

RN: Yes.

SB: That is teamwork, for sure.

RN: It is teamwork. And it's just, those kinds of things. I asked one of the guys if they could, "Can you please reinforce the wall, because we think we're going to have a really heavy piece of artwork coming?" And they did.

SB: How wonderful.

RN: Or, "Can you put an outlet there?" And this is at Jackson Heights, for instance, a community center where we have a very large fluorescent piece by local artist, Richard Santiago. And it makes your life so much easier, if you can imagine, just to have your transformer box in a place already designed for it, so that...

SB: It sounds as though they really want the artwork.

RN: They do, and they're good guys. I mean we are a team.

SB: Does it help draw the public? I would think it does of course.
RN: Well, you know, that's a really good question, because sometimes I wonder if it does or not. I think sometimes public art is very much in this same realm as another public service where people just take it for granted.

SB: I hope not.

RN: I don't know that it's a bad thing too much because—I hope it would be missed if it wasn't there. I was thinking about that on the way over here too, is that well, what if there wasn't any public art? I hope it would be missed, just like you would miss your other services, and…

SB: It's like saying, "Have life without color."

RN: Yes, very much so. You know it's funny, Lion's Club's my favorite charity because of the eyes, and I just cannot imagine—I hate to call it out and say something about having my eyesight affected. But…

SB: It's a vibrant part of our lives, as is this project.

RN: Yes.

SB: And I want to thank you. We're kind of close to the end here, but you—is there anything you'd like to add?

RN: I'd like to thank you. This is a wonderful project.

SB: This is super.

RN: This is…

SB: You've taken a lot of your time, and we really appreciate it. And I think people learned a lot about the project itself and about you as a person too. And who knows, it might inspire somebody.

RN: That would be a gift.

SB: To go into that field.

RN: We could use them!

[Laughter]

SB: It'd be great!
RN: It's wide open! We could use them!

SB: Thank you again, Robin.

RN: Thank you Suzette.

SB: You're welcome.