

KENTUCKY CRAFT HISTORY AND EDUCATION ASSOCIATION, INC.

Interview with Ronald Cooper
Interviewer is Adrian Swain
October 27th, 2009

() This symbol refers to an inaudible word or phrase.

. . . This symbol refers to an interruption to the speaker

Swain: Well, we'll try to keep this from being too painful.

Ronald Cooper: I'm sure it won't be.

Cameraman: Okay, when you're ready. We've got about twenty minutes or so on this tape, but I've got another tape, so.

Swain: You're not rolling yet are you?

Cameraman: I'm rolling. You can start whenever you want.

Swain: This is Adrian Swain interviewing Ronald Cooper at his home in Flemingsburg, Kentucky on October the 27th, 2009 for the Kentucky Craft History and Education Association. Ronald, in a sentence describe the type of work that you do. Artwork.

Cooper: Artwork? Well, I have a a little religious touch along with it. I'm deeply born again Christian and like, if I do hell, things I put on there, you know, write on it and what I did would be like to be in hell and try to warn people that way. So it's kind of a little bit a message to it, also.

Swain: What kinds of things that you make that you could describe? Describe your work.

Cameraman: Will you hold on one second? . . . And anytime.

Swain: Can you describe the kinds of things, kinds of objects that you make?

Cooper: Yea, when I see something, I know what I'm going to do with it when I see it. Just like little trucks and things, when I started doing them. That was a good idea I had, because I knew that I could put people in there like it was real sinners, you know, and the devil would be operating equipment and taking them on to hell.

Swain: Okay. And you make a wide range of different kinds of things, right?

Cooper: Yea.

Swain: You use a lot of objects that already exist and you modify them?

Cooper: Yea, I do make them look the way I want them to look.

Swain: When and where were you born?

Cooper: I was born in Plumber's Landing in Fleming County, Kentucky.

Swain: And when?

Cooper: April 14, 1931.

Swain: Can you describe your childhood and family background?

Cooper: Well, I was the baby of the family and I had 9 brothers and sisters and so they kept me pretty busy watching me and so forth. And then, of course, my dad passed away when I was 16 years old and my mom passed away too real soon after that.

Swain: Can you tell us about your early education, schooling?

Cooper: The highest I went in education was the first year of high school.

Swain: Okay, ninth grade.

Cooper: Ninth grade, uh huh.

Swain: What about other careers you had before you turned your hand to art?

Cooper: Well, I worked in grocery stores and sold cars a little bit. Little bit of everything like that and also worked for General Motors and . . . Trying to think all the places I've worked at. But I've worked in several different types of work.

Swain: Several different kinds of careers.

Cooper: Yea.

Swain: And what motivated your interest in art? How did you get started?

Cooper: Well, I don't really hardly know how I did start really. We started . . . My wife, she always had this in her head, you know, to do this. She knew how to do this and she was helping me along, because she always painted a little bit you know, so she would try to get me involved in it and she did and we made a few things and sold a few things. We heard about a place in mountain country that was a Catholic organization that sold things for people and so we took a bunch of stuff up there and put it all out for sale.

Swain: And that was in David, Kentucky.

Cooper: Yep. David, that's right. And Adrian, let's see, I believe it was Tom Stearl had been up there and seen some of our work and he called us and wanted to know if he could come see it. Wanted to know if we had anymore work and I said, "Well, I don't think I have anything". I said, "Jessie might have a little bit of something here, but not much". I said, "We took about everything up there". So he said, "Well can we come over and see and talk to you?" and I said, "Well, sure. Help yourself. Be glad to have you". And so he came over and Jessie had had, I believe she had 3 little dolls that she had made and dried in the sun. Made little bodies and stuff for them and he asked her if she had anything and she said, "Well, I've got 3 little dolls. 3 little mud dolls I've made". And he said, "Will you go get them and show them to me?" So she went back and got them out of the bedroom drawer and showed it to them. And he said, "Well, I like them, do you have anything else?" She said, "No, only thing I got is that little picture on the wall". He said, "What about that? Would you sell that to me?" She said, "Yea, I guess I would" and he said, "Well, would you take \$100 for the three little dolls and the picture?" And we both like fell over. (Laughter, Cooper) So anyway he told us to keep on doing art, you know and it would get better for us the more we do and the Folk Art Center would take care of practically most of it, you know?

Swain: And did that turn out to be true? Did it get easier for you as you went along? The more that you did?

Cooper: That's right.

Swain: You really work with a whole wide range of materials, don't you?

Cooper: Yes. Several different things. Different pieces.

Swain: Other experiences in your life that, kind of, influence the kind of work that you do?

Cooper: Well, I don't know really what it was that influenced me to do that like I've been doing, but after I started doing it and people liked it, I knew then that that's what I wanted to do and so we would go out to flea markets and yard sales and things and I would try to find things for me to work with, you know and Jessie, of course, she just kept on painting, you know. I got so I enjoyed it and I enjoy it, I just don't feel like it like I did.

Swain: Did you learn from anyone else before you began working on your own? To make art? Or was it something that you discovered by yourself pretty much?

Cooper: Well, I worked in grocery stores and for General Motors.

Swain: But I mean, did you learn about art from anybody else or was it something that just came to you?

Cooper: Not really.

Swain: And how much of the way that you work has been the result of experimentation by you?

Cooper: You know, a whole lot if it is experimentation. It's basically something new that I have never worked on before and it was an experiment for me to try and make it look like something somebody would like, you know.

Cameraman: Hold on just a second. Go ahead.

Swain: Have you traveled either in this country or internationally and if so, what impact did that have on your work as an artist or did it?

Cooper: Well, I traveled a whole lot in the United States. About art and things and different places and had a chance to go to Ecuador, but my doctor said it probably wouldn't be good for me, my health, because the different in the humidity and everything there.

Swain: And the altitude, yea.

Cooper: Right. So we didn't go, but we had an offer to go.

Swain: Did those travels that you did in this country, did that have any effect on your art?

Cooper: I still wanted to do the same things I was doing, but I enjoyed looking at other people's art and maybe I would see a glimpse of something and I could do this different and like it a little better the way that one is.

Swain: Okay, I want to talk about your career as an artist. The time that you've spent making art in the last 20 or so years. It started out the way you described it earlier and then what happened?

Cooper: Well, mostly I didn't get time to go anywhere after a while.

Swain: But I mean, no, I'm sorry. What I'm saying the actual work that you did and how your work was received by other people. Did that change the work? Talk about how it was over the years for you working and whether you were successful with your work or did you feel you weren't successful?

Cooper: Yea, I felt I was successful with it because people were buying it pretty good and I never really cared about making any changes much on it. Maybe add something new to it, you know, but other than that, I never thought about changing any of it. I liked the way I was doing it and still do.

Swain: Does your work contain any messages about society or your religious beliefs, about race, about humor, the environment, politics or anything else?

Cooper: About religion mostly. Not too much different toward anything else a lot. Most of the things have something to do with or makes people think about religion anyway.

Swain: Would you say then that that is the major influence that determines the subject of the pieces that you create?

Cooper: Yes. I do.

Swain: Your religious beliefs, okay. Have the subjects you portray in your work changed over time?

Cooper: Not really. Not much. I might make a little bit bigger items than I used to, some of them.

Swain: But the underlying subject remains pretty much the same. Is the way that you work, or the actual work itself, the end product of what you do, is it influenced by the materials that you use or the techniques that you employ in the making of them?

Cooper: I think it's the materials and also the techniques of what I can do with a certain piece, you know?

Swain: Do you feel that your work reflects an inner personal feeling? Do you feel it does? Your work is reflecting something from within you?

Cooper: Yea. I hope so.

Swain: Does this have anything to do with the material that you use or does it reflect something more personal.

Cooper: More personal, I believe.

Swain: It seems that your religious beliefs are very central strong influence, right? In your work. Can you describe your workshop, your working environment that you used to work in or do now work in, the actual space that you work in?

Cooper: It's a lot bigger space now where I've been working. I started out just working in a small place and the boys fixed me up a good workshop and so I moved in that.

Swain: Out behind the house?

Cooper: Yes, out where the garage used to be. They converted it into a workshop. Counters and shelves and so forth.

Swain: Can you describe your working process. How you go about making a piece, I mean. You know, how does it start and how does it end?

Cooper: Well, I look at it and see, well, what can I do with this piece, you know. Maybe I'd lay it back down if I just can't see anything in it and the next time I'll pick it up and I'll see what I can do with it and use it.

Swain: This would be an object that already exists?

Cooper: Yea, partly exists, yea, it just needs some work on it.

Swain: Modify it.

Cooper: Yea, different piece of wood or whatever like that.

Swain: It could be a shoe, it could be a kerosene stone or a toy truck or . . . About anything like that. Old piece of furniture.

Cooper: Yea, a table or anything.

Swain: Right. What tools do you use in making your art?

Cooper: I'm sorry?

Swain: What kind of tools?

Cooper: I just went to grammar school I guess they call it.

Swain: No. Sorry. What tools?

Cooper: Oh, tools. Okay. Well, I got band saws. I got little small saws, I forget what you call them. Things like that, you know. I got glue guns and all kinds of things like that. I've got little grinders.

Swain: All sorts of different power tools.

Cooper: Yea, different to do different things like maybe to make the eyes of the people, carve it out with and so forth.

Swain: Okay. And did you acquire those over a period of time or did you get them all at once or?

Cooper: I got to doing it more in the recent years, yea.

Swain: Has computer technology had any influence on your work or the way you work or your working process?

Cooper: No, it hasn't.

Swain: Where do you exhibit your work?

Cooper: Well, Folk Art Center is one place and Morehead is where I exhibited for years and different places. Lately, it's been I'd go and set up where they were having a show, you know, folk art show and set up there and sell. We were like that.

Swain: And do you do commissions? If somebody comes along and tells you they want you to do such and such.

Cooper: Yea, I do some like that.

Swain: And you just said you have been to art fairs to exhibit your work and sell your work?

Cooper: Yea.

Swain: I know that you've been to the one in Morehead, but you've been to some other ones?

Cooper: Well, I've been to the Atlanta Auction house and they have some of my work there, different people, you know. I've seen my work there and when they have the shows down there.

Swain: Yea, but you don't go to them yourself, your work goes to them, is that what you're saying?

Cooper: No, we went too.

Swain: Oh, you went too. Okay. That's exciting. This may seem like a repetition, but have you promoted and sold your work? Yea, how has your work been sold? Has it been something that you've done yourselves mostly or has it been something that you've done through galleries or?

Cooper: No, something I've done myself. In fact, everything I do myself.

Swain: Okay. Has the experience of selling your work influenced the kind of work that you've produced? Has it changed your mind or has it redirected your choices?

Cooper: Well, somewhat, yea, because basically since Jessie couldn't paint anymore from the Alzheimer's you know and I picked up like painting her shoes and doing the shoes that she used to do, so that's kind of new to me, but I think it's alright. I've sold some, so. (Laughter, Cooper)

Swain: Okay. And you don't use computer technology to promote your work do you?

Cooper: No.

Swain: I wasn't trying to give you the answer, but we knew the answer. What recognition have you gotten for your work?

Cooper: Well, I've got a whole lot of recognition from it. I got a lot of through Morehead. Most of it I guess, really, in a way through Morehead and the Folk Art Center over there, the museum. Like when the . . . What was it . . .

Swain: The Governor's Awards?

Cooper: Yea, () this chair.

Swain: Oh, the Appalachian Treasure Award () from Morehead State University.

Cooper: Yea. I couldn't think of the name.

Swain: Did you receive a Governor's Award?

Cooper: Yea, I did.

Swain: You and Jessie together?

Cooper: Yes.

Swain: The Governor's Award back a number of years ago, right?

(Phone ringing)

Swain: Do you belong to any art or folk art organizations?

Cooper: Well, yes, I guess I do.

Swain: Can you name . . . What would that be?

Cooper: Well, Louisville Art Museum, you know and there's another one or two I can't think of.

Swain: Have you ever taken a leadership role in any of those organizations?

Cooper: No, I haven't.

Swain: Has being a part of the folk art or art community been important to your development as an artist? In other words, the relationships that you've had with other artists, has that been important to you as an artist and your development?

Cooper: Well, people in Flemingsburg, they don't really realize what I'm doing. A lot of them don't. Even though we've been here for all these years doing it.

Swain: But the community of artists, the other artists.

Cooper: Yea.

Swain: Has that been useful to you?

Cooper: Well, I've enjoyed talking to them, you know, about the work they do and so forth.

Swain: But it doesn't really affect your own work, does it not?

Cooper: No, it has nothing to do with my own work.

Swain: Okay. Are there any services that are directed towards artists by agencies, institutions or governments that you have participated in? I think I know the answer to this which is that you were just saying that you got an award a few years ago, which was for recognition, but have there been any other . . . Besides Kentucky Folk Art Center, have there been any other services that you've taken advantage of from other organizations?

Cooper: Not too much.

Swain: Do you subscribe to any magazines or periodicals about folk art or craft?

Cooper: Folk Art Magazine and I think I've got another one or two. One we got not too long ago, they just sent it here and I liked it real well, but I forgot the name of it. It's laying on the table.

Swain: Are you involved in any teaching or writing or other activities that directly related to the craft, to your work as an artist?

Cooper: Not really.

Swain: Has your family been supportive or involved in your work?

Cooper: They've been very supportive and involved too, since I've not been as well. They try to help me all that they can.

Swain: And encourage you?

Cooper: And encourage me.

Swain: Is there anything else that you'd like to just talk about before we wrap it up here. How being involved as an artist has . . . What it's meant to your life, how it's impacted your life?

Cooper: Well, it's helped in many ways. It's helped us financially for one thing and I had bad luck a few years ago and lost a lot of what we had, so that's why selling this art and things has helped so much, you know. Every time I sell a piece of art, I figure I could go buy something else that I needed, you know.

Swain: How did it affect you other than the money? Was there any other kind of impact on your life that you can point to?

Cooper: I think it's made me a better Christian than I was.

Swain: Really?

Cooper: I really do.

Swain: How so?

Cooper: Well, I don't know, just by doing that and writing message and things on things, it's made me to think more about it, you know, as well what I thought when I was doing it. That maybe other people would think about it also. So it's helped me that way. And I felt like it would help. Somebody I knew at church, I had this one guy come up to me and he said that he got right with the lord and he said, "After seeing your work I got right with the lord". And he did, he

got up in church and told them what he saw that made him start thinking about these things, I just never thought about them anymore until I saw that work. So that made me feel pretty good. 200 people in church, you know.

Swain: Not that many people who can say they've had that kind of impact through their art.

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END OF INTERVIEW