

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Jeff Donaldson

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Donaldson, Jeff, 1932-2004
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Jeff Donaldson,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 23, 2001
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2001
<b>Physical Description:</b>	8 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:29:38).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Painter Jeff Donaldson (1932 - 2004 ) was one of the founders of the artists' group AFRI-COBRA. Donaldson helped articulate the Black Arts Movement in the United States. His influential work as a muralist began with Wall of Respect, a 1967 project in Chicago. Donaldson was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 23, 2001, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2001_023
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Jeff Donaldson is an African American artist, art historian, and critic who has helped to articulate the philosophy and aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement in the United States. Born in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, a black college town, in 1937, Donaldson was three when his older brother started drawing. This encouraged him to start drawing cartoons and comic books as well.

Donaldson's love of the arts continued, and upon enrolling in the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, he established the school's first arts major. Here, his lifelong interest in Afrocentric art was nurtured under the tutelage of John Howard, who mentored under the great Harlem Renaissance artist Hale Woodruff. After graduating with a Masters Degree in Fine Arts from the Institute of Design of the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, Donaldson obtained a Ph.D. in African and African American Art History from Northwestern University.

Through his involvement with the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC), a group Donaldson helped form in Chicago, he organized the visual arts workshop that painted the Wall of Respect in 1967. The mural celebrated significant African Americans and set in motion a movement of outdoor murals painted in United States cities throughout the 1970s. Along with Wadsworth Jarrell, Barbara Jones-Hogu, and other African American artists, Donaldson founded AfriCobra (an acronym for African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists) in Chicago in 1968. AfriCobra established its objectives in developing a new African American aesthetics as well as its commitment to the principles of social responsibility, involvement of artists in their local communities, and promotion of pride in Black self-identity.

As a painter, Donaldson has participated in over 200 group and solo exhibitions in galleries and museums in Africa, Europe, South America, the Caribbean, and the United States. He has written numerous critical essays and has served as the Dean of the College of Fine Arts at Howard University. Donaldson also served as Vice President

of the Board of Directors of The Barnes Foundation and was on the Board of Directors of the National Center for Afro-American Artists.

Jeff Donaldson passed away on February 29, 2004 at the age of 71.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Jeff Donaldson was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on April 23, 2001, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 8 Betacame SP videocassettes. Painter Jeff Donaldson (1932 - 2004 ) was one of the founders of the artists' group AFRI-COBRA. Donaldson helped articulate the Black Arts Movement in the United States. His influential work as a muralist began with Wall of Respect, a 1967 project in Chicago.

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## Restrictions

### Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

### Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

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## Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

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## Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### Persons:

Donaldson, Jeff, 1932-2004

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Bieschke, Paul (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Donaldson, Jeff, 1932-2004--Interviews

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African American artists--Illinois--Chicago--Interviews.

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## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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AFRICOBRA (Fine Artists' group)

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## Occupations:

Painter

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

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## Administrative Information

### Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

### Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Jeff Donaldson, April 23, 2001. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

### Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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## Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

## Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Jeff Donaldson, Section A2001\_023\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:14 ?

Artist Jeff Donaldson talks about his mother, a school principal who raised him and his siblings alone after his father died an early death; he talks about her pride and her resentment of the racism that was pervasive in Arkansas in the 1930s and 1940s. He tells about his mother's parents and a slave ancestor who came from Africa, and he shares stories about his paternal grandfather a man with legendary strength who fled Alabama for Arkansas after avenging an assault on his sister. Dr. Donaldson describes Pine Bluff, Arkansas during his childhood and recalls an interest in art that started when he was a small boy.

African American mothers--Arkansas--Pine Bluff.

African American grandparents--Arkansas--Pine Bluff.

Childhood and youth--Arkansas--Pine Bluff.

Racism.

Family history.

Video Oral History Interview with Jeff Donaldson, Section A2001\_023\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:13 ?

Jeff Donaldson talks about his youth in Pine Bluff, Arkansas from junior high to college. He discusses those who influenced him including his mother, Clementine Richardson Donaldson, a well-educated woman concerned with the struggle of the race; his mentor John M. Howard, chairman of the art department at Arkansas State Agricultural, Mechanical and Normal College, who introduced him to the work of artists such as Hale Woodruff and Elizabeth Prophet, and the African American teachers at the segregated schools he attended in Arkansas who taught the revolutionary ideas of black pride and the unvarnished history of race relations in the United States.

Childhood and youth--Arkansas--Pine Bluff.

African Americans--Arkansas--Pine Bluff.

Segregation in education--Arkansas--Pine Bluff.

Mentoring in education--Arkansas--Pine Bluff.

African American mothers--Arkansas--Pine Bluff.

African American artists.

Race relations--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Jeff Donaldson, Section A2001\_023\_001\_003, TRT: 0:31:10 ?

Artist Jeff Donaldson continues to talk about his experiences at Arkansas AM&N College including studying philosophy with George G. M. James at and a weaving course which, despite his dislike for weaving, helped him learn discipline. After graduation in the 1950s he spent a year in Jackson, Mississippi, teaching high school art and participating in the NAACP branch headed by Medgar Evers. Donaldson then describes his experiences serving in the Army in France and studying design at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, from which he earned an M.A. in 1963. Finally, he recalls the founding of OBAC, the Organization of Black American Culture, and the other African American Chicago artists from various disciplines who participated.

University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff.

Evers, Medgar Wiley, 1925-1963.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

United States--Armed Forces--African Americans.

Illinois Institute of Technology.

Organization of Black American Culture.

Video Oral History Interview with Jeff Donaldson, Section A2001\_023\_001\_004, TRT: 0:28:54 ?

Artist Jeff Donaldson talks about his work as an artist and activist in Chicago's Black Arts Movement during the late 1960s and 1970s, including the famous mural on the South Side of Chicago, the Wall of Respect, created by the Organization of Black American Culture, which he had co-founded. He tells of the group along with other black organizations, being targeted by the FBI's COINTEL program which disrupted and eventually caused the "implosion" of the group after the mural was completed. In the place of OBAC, in 1968 Donaldson and others founded AFRICOBRA [African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists], a collective based on a shared artistic and political vision, which has lasted to the present day.

Black Arts movement--Illinois--Chicago.

Organization of Black American Culture--Mural painting and decoration--South Side (Chicago, Ill.).

AFRICOBRA (Group of artists).

African American artists--Illinois--Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with Jeff Donaldson, Section A2001\_023\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:59 ?

Artist Jeff Donaldson talks about creative movements that have developed in Chicago, recalls working on his Ph.D. in African American art history, continues to talk about AFRICOBRA, its involvement in the FESTAC '77 arts festival held in Lagos, Nigeria, and AFRICOBRA's present-day members. He tells about encounters by government agents who had him under surveillance for his connection with the black power movement, and compares the accomplishments possible through violent and nonviolent means. Donaldson argues that Nat Turner and other leaders of slave insurrections should be honored as freedom fighters, and he criticizes today's African Americans for not acknowledging their own heroes.

AFRICOBRA (Group of artists).

African American art--History--Study and teaching.

World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (2nd : 1977 : Lagos, Nigeria).

Turner, Nat, 1800?-1831.

United States. Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Black power--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Jeff Donaldson, Section A2001\_023\_001\_006, TRT: 0:29:04 ?

Artist Jeff Donaldson describes his experiences organizing a group of 75 African American visual artists including his art group, AFRICOBRA, the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists, who participated in FESTAC '77, the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, held in Lagos, Nigeria in January, 1977. He shares his thoughts on Africa and the Diaspora, and on the nature of race relations in America, where he says blacks and whites are closer than anywhere else and their fates are bound together. Dr. Donaldson talks about some of his accomplishments during his 28-year career at Howard University, where he served as Dean of the College of Fine Arts.

AFRICOBRA (Group of artists).

World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (2nd : 1977 : Lagos, Nigeria).

Race relations in the United States.

Howard University.

Video Oral History Interview with Jeff Donaldson, Section A2001\_023\_001\_007, TRT: 0:31:04 ?  
Artist Jeff Donaldson shares his ideas about art, black identity, the Civil Rights Movement and the future of the African American community.  
African American art.  
African Americans--Identity.  
Civil rights movement.

Video Oral History Interview with Jeff Donaldson, Section A2001\_023\_001\_008, TRT: ?  
Jeff Donaldson narrates his photographs.  
Photographs.