

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Deborah Willis

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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>	Willis, Deborah, 1948-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Deborah Willis,
<b>Dates:</b>	June 27, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:45:15).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Photographer and curator Deborah Willis (1948 - ) was a former exhibitions curator at the Smithsonian's Center for African American History and Culture as well as the recipient of the 2000 MacArthur Fellowship. Willis was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 27, 2007, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_190
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Curator and photographer Deborah Willis was born on February 5, 1948 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Ruth and Thomas Willis. The family traditions of photography and quilting would later inspire her career and artistic point of view. Even as a child, she noticed the scarcity of images of blacks in the media. She received her B.A. degree at Temple University in 1972, her B.F.A. degree at the Philadelphia College of Art in 1975, and her M.F.A. degree from Brooklyn's Pratt Institute in 1980. While working towards her degrees, Willis worked part-time with a variety of arts centers and nonprofits. Her work helped cement her interest

in arts education.

After receiving her M.F.A. degree, Willis became the exhibitions coordinator and curator of Photographs and Prints at the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. For the next twelve years, she worked at the Schomburg Center, supervising a collection that includes portraits of famous African Americans, scenes from black history and the work of notable African American photographers. She organized exhibitions of work by James VanDerZee, Doris Ullman, Anthony Barboza, and many others. While working at the Schomburg Center, Willis also published her first book, "Black Photographers, 1840-1940: An Illustrated Bio-bibliography" and began exhibiting her own photographs. She has since exhibited all over the country, most notably at the Smithsonian, the Steinbaum Krauss Gallery and the Bernice Steinbaum Gallery. In 1992, Willis moved to Washington, D.C. and became exhibitions curator at the Smithsonian's Center for African American History and Culture. Working at the Smithsonian for the next eight years, Willis was widely respected as a scholar, curator and artist. During her time at the Smithsonian and the years since then, she has published several more books, including *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* (with Carla Williams), *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers, 1840-Present*, and biographical works on Lorna Simpson, J.P. Ball and James VanDerZee.

Deborah Willis has received several prestigious awards, including the International Center of Photography Infinity Award for Writing in Photography and alumni awards from both the Pratt Institute and the Philadelphia University of the Arts. In 2000, she was the recipient of the esteemed MacArthur "Genius Grant" Fellowship which recognizes highly potential, creative individuals who contribute to society and culture. Soon thereafter, she moved back to New York and joined the faculty of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts as a professor of photography and imaging and eventually became the chair of the department. In 2003, Willis earned her Ph.D. degree in cultural studies at George Mason University. Throughout her career, Willis has authored many books and articles and organized or contributed to countless exhibitions exploring the role of African Americans both in front and behind the lens.

Deborah Willis was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on June 27, 2007.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Deborah Willis was conducted by Adrienne

Jones on June 27, 2007, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Photographer and curator Deborah Willis (1948 - ) was a former exhibitions curator at the Smithsonian's Center for African American History and Culture as well as the recipient of the 2000 MacArthur Fellowship.

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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:**

Willis, Deborah, 1948-

Jones, Adrienne (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

**Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews  
Willis, Deborah, 1948---Interviews

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African American women photographers--Interviews.

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African American professors--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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Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

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Tisch School of the Arts

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**Occupations:**

Photographer

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Curator

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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 Deborah Willis, June 27, 2007. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

## **Processing Information**

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 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 Deborah Willis, Section  
A2007\_190\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:19 2007/06/27

Deborah Willis was born on February 5, 1948 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Ruth Holman Willis and Thomas Willis. When slavery ended, her maternal great-grandfather, Edward Foreman, adopted his surname from his occupation on a farm in North Carolina. Later, he moved north to work on the railroad. In Philadelphia, her

maternal grandparents, Lillian Foreman Holman and Ernest Holman, founded the Mount Sinai Tabernacle Baptist Church, and raised Willis' mother. Willis' father was born in Orange County, Virginia; and, in the late 1930s, moved to Philadelphia. There, he studied tailoring at the Berean Institute. After serving in World War II, he became a police officer, and opened a tailor shop and a grocery store. Willis' mother attended the Apex School of Beauty Culture, and operated a beauty shop in her kitchen. As a child, Willis was influenced by her mother's customers, who were educated professionals. She also worked in her father's grocery store, and went to the movies at integrated theaters.

African American families--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia.

African American parents--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia.

African Americans--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia.

African American police--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia.

African American business enterprises.

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah Willis, Section  
A2007\_190\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:17 2007/06/27

Deborah Willis grew up in a majority African American neighborhood in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where the North Penn Baptist Church was the center of the community. Her father was well known there, as well as in the neighborhoods that he patrolled as a police officer. Willis attended Philadelphia's Rudolph S. Walton School, where she developed an interest in photography after reading Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes' book, 'The Sweet Flypaper of Life.' She went on to attend Theodore Roosevelt Junior High School and West Philadelphia High School. Upon graduation, Willis studied business at Peirce Junior College, and then joined the Volunteers in Service to America at Temple University. With the organization, she assisted impoverished communities throughout the United States. During a trip to Appalachia, she was attacked by the local children due to her race. Willis left Temple University; and, deciding to pursue photography as a career, enrolled in the Germain School of Photography in New York City.

African American children--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia.

African American churches--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia.

African American high school students--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia.

Volunteers in Service to America.

African Americans--Education--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia.

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah Willis, Section  
A2007\_190\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:04 2007/06/27

Deborah Willis moved to New York City in 1968 to attend the Germain School of Photography, while also working as a photography teacher at the Neighborhood Youth Corps and the High School of Fashion Industries. Then, Willis returned to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to work at Temple University, where she met her husband, Black Panther Party member Hank Thomas. She continued her education at the Philadelphia College of Art, where she studied the history of photography. With the encouragement of her teacher, Anne Wilkes Tucker, Willis began researching the history of African American photographers. After graduating, Willis moved with her husband to Plainfield, New Jersey, where their son, Hank Willis Thomas, was born in 1976. Returning to New York City, Willis enrolled at the Pratt Institute, and interned at the Brooklyn Museum. She subsequently was hired to catalog the photography collection at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and published her first book, 'Black Photographers, 1840-1940.'

Philadelphia College of Art.

Historiography and photography.

African American photographers.

African American graduate students--New York (State)--New York.

Pratt Institute--Students.

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

African Americans--Marriage.

Divorce.

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah Willis, Section  
A2007\_190\_001\_004, TRT: 0:29:43 2007/06/27

Deborah Willis curated photography exhibitions at New York City institutions like the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and the Studio Museum in Harlem. Concurrently, she wrote publications on African American photographers like James Presley Ball, and continued her own photographic projects, including a series on beautician shops and body builders. She also created 'Daddy's Ties,' a photographic quilt made from her father's ties and cloth printed with his portrait. In 1992, Willis was invited to develop an African American cultural museum at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. While awaiting Congressional approval for the museum, Willis curated exhibitions of African American artwork at the Smithsonian Institution's existing venues, and continued to publish works on African American photographers. Willis also recalls the murder of her nephew, Songha Thomas Willis, which took place one day prior to the opening of her exhibition, 'Reflections in Black,' in 2000.

African American photographers.

African American curators--Washington (D.C.).

Historiography and photography.

New York Public Library.

Smithsonian Institution--Photography collections--Exhibitions.

National Black Arts Festival.

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah Willis, Section  
A2007\_190\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:25 2007/06/27

Deborah Willis' exhibition, 'Reflections in Black,' opened in 2000 at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and included over three hundred historical images of African Americans. That year, Willis was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship, which she used to write 'The Black Female Body: A Photographic History' with photographer and historian Carla Williams. Willis taught at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for one year, and then accepted an offer to join the faculty of New York University. Just before moving to New York City, Willis was diagnosed with breast cancer, and underwent



chemotherapy. During her treatment, she taught courses on beauty culture and the African American body at New York University and Harvard University. She also continued to photograph African American beauty shops and shotgun houses in the South, and created a series of images of New Orleans, Louisiana before and after Hurricane Katrina.

African American photographers--Washington (D.C.)--Exhibitions.

Breast--Cancer--Patients.

Duke University--Faculty.

MacArthur Fellows Programs.

African American college teachers--North Carolina--Durham.

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah Willis, Section  
A2007\_190\_001\_006, TRT: 0:18:27 2007/06/27

Deborah Willis reflects upon her career, and concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.

Photography.

African American women photographers.

Thomas, Hank Willis, 1976-.