



# 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
<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 Betacam SP videocassettes (2:45:15).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Curator, photographer, and photography professor Deborah Willis (1948 - ) is 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, photographer and photography professor 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, "Illustrated Bio-Bibliography of Black Photographers, 1840-1988," 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 in Photography" (with Carla Williams), "Reflections in Black: A History of African American 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 Betacam SP videocassettes. Curator, photographer, and photography professor Deborah Willis (1948 - ) is 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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## HistoryMakers® Category:

EducationMakers

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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 8/9/2011 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, June 27, 2007

Video Oral History Interview with Deborah Willis, Section A2007\_190\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:19  
2007/06/27

Deborah Willis slates the interview. Willis was born on February 5, 1948, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to Ruth and Thomas Willis. Willis's parents ran a grocery store and Ruth also ran a beauty shop out of the family kitchen. Ruth was a giving and spiritual woman and Thomas was fun and charismatic but could be stern. Thomas was a tailor until 1950 when he joined the police department; he was one of the first black police officers in Philadelphia. Willis describes her childhood home as full of people and laughter. The family was very creative and Willis's parents encouraged singing, dancing, writing, cooking, sewing, and storytelling.

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 describes her childhood growing up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The community was closely knit and anchored by Baptist churches. When Willis turned sixteen, her father gifted her with a car which gave her a measure of independence. Instead of attending the middle school in her neighborhood, Willis attended Roosevelt Middle School in Germantown, a section of Philadelphia. Willis remarks that the school suffered from violence and an intense clique mentality. It was in high school that she began to develop her interest in photography. After graduating from high school, Willis worked for the Center for Community and trained Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) for a year. After deciding she wanted to move to New York, New York, Willis applied to the Germain School of Photography in 1968 so she could improve her photography portfolio.

African American children--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia.

African Americans--Church--Pennsylvania--Philadelphia.

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

Volunteers in Service for 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 recalls attending the Germain School of Photography in New

York, New York. She enjoyed her education but she preferred photographing her hometown of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She left New York and enrolled at Philadelphia College of Art to study the history of photography where she discovered a lack of images with African American subjects. She married Hank Thomas and they moved to New Jersey in 1975. A year later, her son Hank Willis Thomas was born. Willis discusses her graduate studies at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn and the adversity she faced as one of the few black students. During this time, she divorced Hank. Afterwards, she moved back to Philadelphia but commuted to New York to work at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. During the twelve years that she worked for the Schomburg Center, her first book, *Illustrated Bio-Bibliography of Black Photographers, 1840-1988* was published.

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 describes her early career as a photographer and as a curator. She received her first grant from New York Public Library (NYPL) to research J.P. Ball. Willis goes on to discuss her work and her interest in photographs of black women. She speaks on specific works such as her project, "Bodybuilders," and her project with quilts. In 1992, Willis worked with the Smithsonian Institute to develop an African American history museum on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Willis talks about her own work that was displayed at the 1992 National Black Arts Festival and the exhibitions that she curated for the Smithsonian. In 2000, she published a work entitled, "Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers, 1840 to the Present," that consolidated all of her work on the history of black photographers.

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 discusses her exhibitions in Washington, D.C. In 2000, she received the MacArthur Fellowship, nicknamed the "Genius Grant." She left the Smithsonian to teach American studies and documentary studies at Duke University in North Carolina. While at Duke University, she was diagnosed with breast cancer and lost her hair due to chemotherapy. Her hair loss inspired her to work on the project, "Beauty Matters." She then goes to speak about other works of art and her show at the Smithsonian entitled, "Let Your Motto Be Resistance."

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

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 discusses her career and the importance of studying visual history. Her book, "Posing Beauty" investigates how photographers think about beauty and photography, and how they share stories. Willis goes on to talk about the power and seductiveness of images. Her son, Hank Willis Thomas, is also a photographer and she finds him considering similar issues. Willis then narrates family photographs as well as samples of her own artwork.

Photography.

African American women photographers.

Thomas, Hank Willis, 1976-.