Proceed with Caution Session

Jason Church: I want to start off. My name is Jason Church, materials conservator with the National Center for Preservation Technology and Training in Natchitoches. I heard the people earlier in the last session were introducing themselves as to how they got started all this. I'm going to throw a mine in too.

I was an undergrad an Appalachian State University and ran an antiques mall. In that mall, we had a dealer named Howard Campbell. I don't know if anyone here knew Howard. He was a collector of folk art extraordinaire. I think Slotin did four days' auction when he passed away just to clear out what had been left of his estate, thousands of pieces. He asked me if I would help him work at an auction one day. I said, "Sure. I was off. What the heck, make a little extra money. It sounds like fun."

I went to his house. He proceeded to load the entire back of his truck with Finster paintings. I'd never seen anything like it. They were mostly the plexiglass boxes. [inaudible 00:01:05], you guys all know [inaudible 00:01:05]. It blew me away. I'd never seen anything like it. Then, he started loaning me books by the truckload. I started reading after that and then started going with him to meet artists and see sites. That was my introduction to it. I was doing an art history minor at the time. Luckily, my professor knew about art environments and loved them and had grown up near one that's no longer existent in Bath, North Carolina.

He said as soon as the lady who he loved, she had an entire house filled with dolls, tens of thousands, they hung for the ceilings. They were painted. They
were plastered to the walls, said the day she died, the family burned the house down. That was my introduction not only to folk art and environments but to the ephemeral nature of these sites and how important they were. I've been on my mind all through my conservation training.

Today we're going to talk about working with living artists. We've all had the pleasure of working with living artists. We've talked about a lot of these sites as in older sites what do we do with them now but ... We're going to switch gears and talk about working with sites when the artist is still there. I'm going to start off talking about Juanita Leonard. She's a self-taught artist in Montgomery, Louisiana, which is a just a tiny little village not far from Natchitoches.

Juanita is amazingly pleasant person. She is really fun loving, loves people to come visit her, the whimsy of her personality is that everything she does, and this is a great picture. I took this just a couple days before this conference. She had just made her monkey sculpture. She said she made this because, as a little girl, all she ever wanted was a pet monkey, and her mom wouldn't let her have it. She was very happy that she finally has her pet monkey that she's always wanted. She was very proud of the sculpture. She let me take a picture of her with it.

Give you a little peek into Juanita's world. This is the house that she lives in. It's constructed of her own doing, This is the interior. The entire interior's like this, furniture, floor, ceiling, walls, everything's painted. Kitchen cabinets, everything's painted or constructed by her, light fixtures, everything. This is the second house on the property. The first house and the property she doesn't live anymore. She uses it for storage, but it was like this as well. She also has two churches on the property. She's a deeply religious person. That's what drives her to do this.

She wants people to stop, talk to her so that she can witness to him. Then, she holds church and has a pretty sizable congregation at her church each Sunday. I'll show you a church in a second. That is what I'm going to talk about today is just her church. The whole site is an environment. The yard, the property behind it, her house or houses, but I'm just going to focus today on the church.

When I met her going on 10 years ago, this is what the church looked like. This is just one side of the outside. These are the angel sculptures that she had. They're made out of discarded bandaging material from the local doctors' offices. These are just the standard cast wrappings soaked in plaster of Paris and then painted. When I met her, I was really intrigued by these. They supported themselves. They're heavily screwed on to the plywood. You can see they're sitting partially resting on the disposable pots for plants.

I talked to her about it and already some were slumping and you can see one that's been taken down. If it's not bolted down, it has hardly any shape to herself. It falls over these boxes. We talked a long time. She asked it what do I do. I explained to her I was conservative. She's very interested what that was.
We have a long in-depth conservation, about conservation, about what we do as conservators to try to save sculptures like this and things like that.

The next time I came to visit her, they were all gone. She had replaced him with metal. I was shocked, and some of them are actually behind the metal, they've just been bolted overtop of the plaster of Paris, ones you saw. What happened to the other angels? She said, "Well, Jesus sent you to talk to me. I now know that I should build out of more rigid materials." I thought, "Oh. I don't know if that's good or bad."

It really bothered me. I think that's one of the things I want to bring to the discussion table is did I have a negative or positive effect or should I have had any effect. Now, I'd tell people I work at the university. If they ask, if I visit a site, "Oh, I work at the University." But that's what became of this is, and this is a photograph of her, which she does. She cuts them out with scissors. These are modified tin shears. Then, she stitches these together. They're multiple pieces. She takes a hammer, nail and knocks holes in them and stitches them with baling wire together.

These statues are sewn together. Yeah. Miscellaneous forearms are like this big. It's amazing to watch her cut. This is roofing, corrugated roofing tin. To watch her cut it with scissors is amazing. That's the transition that started to happen because, as she said, Jesus sent me to her to explain to her that materials weather and that she needs to change your materials.

This is the same church. These metal angels are now gone because she realized, "Well, what's even more permanent than metal? Cement, concrete." It has switched gears. Yet again, this is how it looks currently. It's a little different. She's redoing the walkway and has added more sculptures in front of it right now, but this is essentially what we have now, which is ... She told me "Well, don't worry. Not all the angels are gone. Some of them are still under there."

Some of them are still there. Some of them are in a pile, and a lot of the metal ones have been sold off, but that's that ever constant changing site. We also talked about not only the theoretical debate of did I have an influence and was that good or bad, but we talked a lot about how these sites changed. This is only in the span of 10 years. This has gone through three or four different iterations. Everything on that site changes. It's why it's really important when we talked about Pasaquan yesterday. In the panel, we were talking one day if we have to go back, let's say in the future and we're going to conserve this site, what do we go back to? Do we go back to the plaster of Paris angels? Do we go back to the Meadowlands? Do we go back to the stone? What's it going to look like next?

That's why it's really important if you're working with sites like this to photograph them all the time. Then, I really want to put a plugin for spaces. If you're not familiar with it, go check out the website, but to donate documentation because these things are constantly changing like they're talking.
about Finsters yesterday, how many times that one sign moved around the property.

This is the current iteration. She's doing these concrete angels. There, she's putting them on pole. She said she wants everything off the ground now. That's her current method. She wants them all on poles up in the air. The higher, the better. These are her current angels that she's making as we speak. They'll all be completely painted eventually and on poles. That's where we're going. You can see the church of the background. That's still the church she has served in. There's a really great picture by Fred near the back of the inside of her church. I didn't include any pictures on it. Sorry.

Then, part of it is did she change because now that someone's introduced or conservation, did I have a negative or positive influence on the art or maybe it's just as Juanita said on one of her side of her one of her houses. Maybe, it's just changed. There's no rhyme or reason to it, but it's always going to be evolving.

Dennis Montagna: Thank you, Jason. I've been following your lead of like how'd you get her. I'm an art historian by training. I came through academic art or history. Then, I went to work in a Historic Preservation Office of the National Park Service. I had a turn more toward architectural preservation and saving buildings and preserving buildings. That change, I think, is something that helped me to be more open or more interested in maybe more the accommodation of things when I began looking at environments.

But the first environments that we're involved with was really of the Vollis Simpson Whirligig site in Lucama, North Carolina about I guess this 2010 when that project began. You'll hear more about that later and basically to help them, I run a historic preservation of sculpture and monument preservation assistance branch for the Park Service in Philadelphia. I was asked to come I and help advise them on preservation, preserving these painted metal machines. I got involved in [inaudible 00:11:13]. We've been working on that project in the years since.

Through another project, we've been working on a very traditional bronze conservation project brought me out to Great Bend, Kansas. The people I got to know at the Historical Society, they had been working on a project looking at Hoisington, Kansas. Hoisington is a small community, north of Great Bend, part of Barton County and had been the part of the county everybody made fun of. It's where the railroad workers live. That's where the bordellos were. It was the joke of the county.

The Historical Society decided, "Well, let's learn about cultural resources in Hoisington. They began interviewing people a very fairly sizable Mexican community, many of whom had lived in discarded boxcars that have been converted into living spaces. One of the women who is a multi-generation Mexican family is married to an Anglo guy who has been making cemetery
monuments out of concrete for about the last decade or so. We talked about working with a living artist. This is a new person.

Most of us are used to working with people who are gone, in some cases long gone and we're fortunate to be able to work with Vollis when he was still alive. The measure of all things was one's self. This guy's younger than I am. You know what I mean? He's just begun making these constructions. This is the first one that he made. What he's trying to do here is he was noticing in his locals, local cemetery that there were many graves that had very minimal markings. Most of them had only these little funeral, noticed these little metal things with the changeable letters.

He knows that some of these are very old. In some cases, they've been replenished, but they were sometimes 20 and 30 years old. He took it upon himself to begin, I guess, about a dozen years ago making these concrete monuments. A lot of what he did would do research because he didn't know these people. He had no connection personally with these people. He would try to find out whatever he could find out. This woman, Creola Paxton, all he could find out was she died in 1947. He'd met some people who knew her. All he knew was that she loves sewing. That's what he put on her marker. He would make these out of reinforced concrete and then selectively paint them.

Here's a child's grave. There was a marking for a child who had died, I am assuming, probably at birth or very soon after. He would create this figure. He had this. He describes this as a holy man. He doesn't go beyond that with a description of it, but with these children's graves, there's usually a protective, of figure, that that's holding an infant. He puts these concrete foundations and then puts his assembly on top.

Really love this one. This is Lela Bailey. All he knew about her was that her husband had pre-deceased her. In creating that, he created two figures. He's already up above waiting for her. [crosstalk 00:14:33] I'm sorry. Phil Webb. I should have ... I'm getting ... Yeah. Philip Webb is the artist. He works for a cable company making cable. He basically manufactures cable in Hoisington, Kansas.

At this point, he's done about a dozen of these in his local cemetery. Elmo Johnson, Sr. What he found out about him was that he'd been a railroad worker and had served in the Navy. It's the thing you would find in an online obituary oftentimes. That informs a lot of these. He decided to do two figures, one representing Mr. Johnson as a young man in the Navy and the other as a retired railroad worker.

There's a patriotic component to a lot of these. He seems to focus a lot on that. This one, Neal Williams, these are more recent ones. Neal Williams apparently has no tie to Hoisington, Kansas at all. He's from Missouri. Phil doesn't know why he's buried there, but he is. He was able to do some research in military records and found out that he had been shot down during World War II and captured, spent time in a prisoner of war camp, knew what the name of the
airplane was. I found a picture of the plane online. He knew what
commendations Neal had gotten. He represented those commendations as well
as a portrait of Neal on his monument.

The reason I know this is one of his more recent ones too is that he said that,
initially, he was making these large monolithic ones all in one piece, but they
were so heavy to move out to the cemetery. He makes them in his garage,
moves him out to the cemetery. Now, he makes them in pieces. He assembles
them on site. This one when he began working with, the only thing that was
sticking in the ground was that little United Spanish War veterans, bronze cross
with the flag. That was the only thing that indicated there was a grave there.

He had no idea who that was even. He did research and got the names of all of
the people from Hoisington who served in the Spanish-American war figuring,
okay, it's got to be one of them. He created this monument that is taking its lead
from the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. It's an unknown person. That's fun.
Then, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and that's the form that he used right
down to the inscriptions on the Tomb of the Unknown. He reproduced on the
side of his monument complete with the proper phrase, breaks, and everything.

He's doing a lot of research. He's online all the time. Here's another source of
information for people working today. This is the only one so far that has been a
commissioned piece. I don't know who's actually paid for it, but someone asked
him to make this for Duane Detter who just died. He was a bass player. There's
the name of his band behind and a couple of speakers. I found him online too.
He was part of Ronnie and the Rockits. They were a cover band that tours to
Central Kansas. Ronnie's wife asked Phil to make a monument for him.

Within the last couple of years ... I first met Phil probably, I want to say, four
years ago. I've talked to him twice now and between the time that I first met
him and went back, he's been discovered by public television in Kansas. There's
a long-running series called sunflower journeys. They went out there
interviewed him, took the video. Several local newspapers have talked with him.
He's become better known. Someone posted something about him on my
Facebook feed. People are knowing him more.

During this period of time since people have been coming to see him, he's
returned and has repainted a lot of things that he had just done a few years
before, sometimes freshening up color, sometimes adding different colors,
sometimes adding paint where there hasn't been color before. He's been doing
a lot of brighter pink now than he seems. Some of the pinks may have faded,
but he's using a more vibrant palette in a lot of ways. This particular one, the Ida
Mae Richardson, another child grave, there was no painting on the text that
shows her name. He's gone back recently and has added that

The Spanish-American war figure, initially, I think that was a fairly low-key color
of the whole uniform. He's gone back and has articulated in a different way. This
really gets back to Jason's point when you're working with ... We're used to
working with artists who have been gone for a long time. These things are fixed. They are with the piece that we see, but when you're working with somebody who's unknown, it's moving. It's changing a lot. I think Jason has a clear example working with Juanita.

Well, Phil is changing a lot as well. The importance of being there to be documenting, I think, is probably the biggest contribution we could make to be able to at least have a record of that stuff. Here's one that we just recently painted again too, changed the color of the road from white to ... we made the pale blue to a darker blue, changed the color of the stone to a gray. These things are in a flex even though they say these things are no more than about 12 years old.

In the changes, the aspect of them changes. I think that has a lot to do with the fact that he's going out. He's painting these things out in the cemetery as opposed to being able to work on his bench in the comfy confines of his garage. You can see there's a real difference. This figure feels differently. He has done like a secondary blanket. The infant is more enclosed, is less exposed in a way. The face is really different. Those eyes are really, really different, and the skin. They go through changes all the more reason to really catch these different moments in terms of documentation.

He's also begun to make a garden at home now. He's apparently on the verge of retire. I think when that happens, you're going to see a lot more, but this is the Google Earth. His house is the one with the brown roof right on the corner, and you can see his garage building. Then, all around that is the garden. He recently took down a greenhouse because he said he wanted additional space. He's using these limestone constructions mostly butterfly bushes. He's talked a lot about using butterfly bushes. He's peopling this with all these different historical figures, summer self-portraits, different figures doing different activities. This stuff has a much lighter, much more whimsical quality than the work he's doing in the cemeteries.

The earliest one he said he did there was the Abraham Lincoln with his arms outstretched. George Washington Carver on the left. I'm just beginning to understand what he likes. I'm trying to approach him and draw him out a little bit of time. He's very friendly, but he's very reserved too. Then, God, he described that as being God on the right sitting on his fence.

This is another one. It's part of a larger assemblage which he was going to begin working on of a birdwatcher not knowing that there was a bird sitting on his hat. Then, this one, which I think is really ... [inaudible 00:22:15] These two guys carrying this giant limestone, piece of fieldstone from the fields of Kansas. Then, a woman behind wasting one up over her head. He said people think that she's going to throw it at them. He said, "That's never what I meant. I just meant that it takes two men to do what this woman can do by herself."
He's constructing these little stories of people sometimes get or sometimes down, but these are these figures. They're all reinforced concrete. He's got iron rods running from one guy to another to support the weight of the stone. Where is he coming from? He's coming from a lot of places. He's very tuned in. As I say, he's online. He's doing research. He does murals too. You can see that he really works color the way a painter does in a lot of ways. There's a lot of nuance to the color.

He also has done murals. He did a mural for pediatricians waiting room. He did research to find out what movies our kids looking at now. He has figures in the windows from Frozen and from all various other things. He's very tuned into the culture around him. He's mentioned R. Crumb. I think that there's a real tie-in between Mr. Natural and his God figures sitting on the fence, but I think Wallace and Gromit, I have been talking about that, but I think Wallace and Gromit is clearly in there as well.

In his garden, he decided to make a footpath of all round. He would make these round stones. He tried to figure out motifs that would work well within a round setting. There's a little girl across the street named Lexi who said, "Oh, Phil, you should do a pizza. You really should do a pizza." He did a pizza. He wrote, "Hi, Lexi," on it. All of this to me says he's very engaged with people. He has a really nice feeling for people. He likes to interact although, still, he's very shy. He's becoming ... made more as people talk to him more, but he's friendly, but he's not a gregarious person. I'm trying to be aware of talk to him and try to figure out more and more about him, but it's an interesting project.

It's constant change. I'm trying to figure out what the role is. He's interested in making his paints last longer. That's one of the ways that I actually brought Ron in to talk with him, and Ron's going to pick it up. He's going to talk both of the Vollis and also about Phil.

Ronald Harvey: My name is Ron Harvey. I'm a conservator in private practice. I've been a conservator for the last 37 years. I was completing an MFA in sculpture. There was a Museum Studies Program. For years, I took a year's worth of credits instead of going to seminars and talking about why is capital A art better than small A art. At the end of that, I went into New York on my portfolio. Being from New Jersey, I like ... pushed my way into OK Harris and had him look at my work and then also at Cordier & Ekstrom because I grew up outside of Philadelphia. I fell in love with Duchamp before I even knew what Duchamp was. I would spend times in the museums and the large glass just ... was like this point for me.

I came out after talking to Ekstrom in the gallery and just went, "I don't want to do this. I want to be a conservator." I called the guy, the conservator I've been working with volunteering three hours a week as part of the graduate program. In those days, there was seed money, which is white-collar welfare. I went back. A three-year funded internship was hired by as his assistant. The following year, went off to do a year at Harvard, at the Peabody Museum, because my interest
and desire was to be an ethnographic conservator. They didn't exist in those
days.

My artwork was influenced by ethnographic art. I was using string and chickens,
chicken bones and wires and feathers and things from the ocean. Even the
grounds inside my pieces, I was creating, were parts of beaches that I would
bring from ... I was going to school in Wisconsin from New Jersey to get
shopping bags of sand. There's a whole idea that this self-educated art seems so
familiar and comfortable to me. Anyhow, that's my story.

What I want to talk about is Vollis Simpson. Here's a guy who's just amazing,
born in 1919 in Lucama, North Carolina. He was one of 12 children on a farm
and, being a good creative kid, learned a lot of skills like welding and repair and
went off, of course, and served because he was also someone who was a good
American and served in World War II. He was with the US Army Corps of
Engineers ... Corps during the Second World War in the Pacific Theater. He was
stationed in Saipan, in Northern Marianas Islands.

There was a problem there. It's the war. These guys are all in tropical areas and
wanted to do their laundry. Vollis, being the farmer boy, said, "Hmm okay." He
constructed a windmill out of parts from the adjunct B-29 Superfortress bomber
to power a washing machine for his company. It was so good someone stole it.
He actually built another one bigger.

He goes back to the states. His father moved houses, is also to make money as
part of ... With your farm, you do a million things. Vollis and two of his brothers
continued that business. He became known as the guy to move giant pieces of
mechanical equipment because if at all familiar, Wilson, which is the next town
over, is like the center for tobacco in the United States or was. He designed and
built a ...

We worked on his moving houses and all of that until probably he was about in
1980s and then retired. Then, the man went crazy. This is a sighting, and you'll
see there's a water feature. There's a section of land to either side of the water
feature that was part of the Vollis farm, but I want you to remember the road
that's coming down from the direct top that almost if you kept going and run
into the water.

Vollis was making these structures. He was comfortable moving things like
houses. Now, remember these Whirligigs that he was making are kinetic and
painted and complex surfaces and could be 40 or 50 feet high. They functioned
They worked. One of the things that Dennis and I immediately ... There's this
amazing sound when they're moving. It could be a really gentle wind. Some of
them were not functioning anymore because Vollis was now in 90s, early 90s. It
was just not capable of keeping it running, but amazing. Amazing.
We have all kinds of issues like rust and attached pieces and this funny reflective stuff and all these different levels of deterioration. He was using things like spray paint and not priming and painting. It was more about making him than keeping him. What had happened was since Vollis was older, the family didn't want to keep these pieces. Vollis wanted them to actually have a life. We were hoping that they would stay in their original location. There was a group of people in town in Wilson that wanted to do an economic development project, realized that 50% of the population in Wilson was unemployed or some are underemployed.

If they wanted to do this project of what if we acquire the Whirligigs and we repair them and then move them back into a new location downtown, which would generate ... This earlier talk of community relations of it would become a destination. It would bring people into the community because the community was suffering because tobacco industry was flat. The people who were making money in tobacco were making it in China or in India. They were moving things out of the country, but not making money in the country. Certainly not hiring a lot of people.

The question was, again, we had these nuances. We had pieces that we see as I love Dennis's phrase, the hand of Vollis. We see these painterly surfaces that are much more complex than these flat big sheets with just a single color . The question was there was an OK writer. We were brought in to like, well, what do you think we should do. We're not curators. We have ideas, and you heard my lecture earlier if you were in ... that this idea of having a curator and a conservator is the best. I'd even make it to try it [inaudible 00:32:23] Dennis a curator and a conservator the best.

Are you going to end up doing the swab and stick, which is the way people often think of conservation bench work or you're going to do like wholesale, we got a we got a strip these, repaint them, reattach, how far do we go with this? What level of aesthetic compensation, restoration do these pieces move to? It's certainly what Jason was talking about.

We're talking huge mechanical pieces that are massive and needed to move in order to be what they were. Again, the group in town had some money. They ended up having someone donate the use of a nice storage space. It was the Barn Street Warehouse. Dennis and I had attended NCPTT Outsider Art Conference in 1911. Thank you. 2011, not that old and nor is the conference.

Brooke Anderson, and many you may know her, she had been the curator at the Folk Art Museum in New York then went to LACMA. She's since moved on. She was in New Orleans. Now, she's at Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts as director, but she comes from and embraces self-taught artists. Being Mr. Jersey like [inaudible 00:34:00] to her and like, "Dennis, we've got to talk to her." Brooke, we need to do conservation, but we need curatorial input. Would you be willing to come in and at least help us?
She was brought in by the organization and spent a couple of days talking to Danny who was a lead mechanic. He's showing her what she's doing and the idea was to replace where you have mechanical systems, which are failed and use better systems because these are going to be 30, 40, 50 feet in the air. They're going to need maintenance. If you can make things as functional as possible and is long lasting, and so they were in the closed systems. They ended up putting little access panels at their ports that they could then have screw tips to block so you could lubricate. You could actually plot out on these pieces what had to be maintained in terms of the mechanical side.

Brooke got to meet and spend some time with Vollis and actually to keep him occupied as Dennis’s [crosstalk 00:35:10]. Yeah. He's taking things off the wall [crosstalk 00:35:12]. It was really great. Vollis reminded me so much. I live in Maine and have for the last 29 years. As a Maine, at very limited ... I said, "Do you want these things to remain the way they are and rusty and I can encapsulate that and keep that?" I don't know why you're worried about the rust.

Through conversations and through multiple [crosstalk 00:35:44] Yeah. Grease is more important than paint. Another one of his great lines, that his idea was, yeah, they should work. They should be quiet. They should look the way they were. Not only did we have the blessing in terms of the move of the piece. Again, I say we. We were the outsiders. We're not driving the project although we're trying to influence the project.

It was really neat because, often, we don't have that opportunity to talk to the artist to have him say, "Yeah, moving them is okay." Do they have to be the same location to one another? No. What we wanted to do was to try and have a system in terms of conservation that would implement colors that were accurate and systems that would be long-term stable.

One of the things that Brooke brought ... I was struggling because some of these pieces are so fragile. Brooke in her curatorial wisdom said, "Aren't he talking about some sort of a museum space?" I said, "Yeah. They're vacillating."

She said, "Why don't you keep those pieces at her most fragile and they can be indoors?" At some point, perhaps do intervention stabilize paint, stabilize rust, and replicate them and put the replicas out on these massive pieces. You have that ability to have the viewer see the most original materials at eye level rather than 30, 40, 50 feet and preserve those aspects especially things like hand painting and stuff.

Remember, I was saying, "Remember, that road how it comes into that point, which it was Vollis's land." As you're driving up at night, this is what you saw. All those little-colored pieces were highway signs that he cut up different colors, attach them. At night, these pieces were not only kinetic, but they were lit up. Locally, it was known as Acid Park. Go figure.
Here, you see the piece from one at the larger photograph, this upper right is the time-machine piece is like 2010. On the bottom, it's prepped to go up. The idea was what are we going to do in terms of this paint. The paint you're seeing here are the new ... The new material is a primer and paint system. That's an epoxy paint, that proxy primer, excuse me, and a siloxane tile paint. You're getting probably 20 years of longevity at least. These are paints that were designed for outdoor use in terms of bridges. The oldest example is the Niagara bridge.

I talked to the science side of the company that fabric that produces this paint. She said, "Ron, the paint will hold up well. It's long life, we say, 10 to 15, 20 years." She said, "I could show you examples that are 30, 35 years." It's also retrofitted. The idea is that there's a paint system on that that's going to protect the surface. The mechanical systems have been have been replaced. It shows the best of Vollis when Vollis was younger and when the pieces were vibrant.

It goes into a park downtown and opens in November. If you google Vollis Simpson Whirligig, you'll get more than you want. You'll get website information. You'll get the site that the park is running in Wilson, and you can get more information about him and see more transition of the pieces.

Struggling with a living artist. The others Dennis and I were working on a World War I monument in Kansas. He said, "Come on. Let's go. I need to interview this guy. Let's go, and you'd like to meet him." Here's a studio. It's a really neat space. He's not using ferrous metal armatures. He's doing really great work in terms of the plaster or the masonry, the concrete. Again, yeah, we have similar taste. What a surprise.

Again, [inaudible 00:40:39] thought she was throwing it. I just thought it was like, "Come on, boys" Can't you like each carry a stone?" Again, we saw this not only ... As I'm looking, as a conservator, not only the failing paint and the adjustment, but the nuancing, the way he's mixing paint and painting in a very painterly manner and saying, "Phil, you're going to lose this. You're spending so much time working on this, and you're using materials that may not hold up well. Can I suggest something?" He went, "Yeah. I really want to know more." We'll talk to the people at Golden.

Golden Paints has been working voraciously on research and testing and documenting their acrylic paints and their top coat acrylic resin UV-inhibitor surfaces for outdoor murals. None of the pieces of Phil's work exhibit a rising damp. We're not having that problem. It's mostly weathering and fading. I know he's contacted them. I know he's switched over. I am, on one level, that conundrum of it is interaction, it is a level of knowledge rather than interference again coming out of Fine Arts, artists always adopt ... It's not unusual to see artists like Bernard Langley go from 2D work, the 3D work or 3D work to 2D work.
I think the material part is interesting. The artists that I've talked to outside of conservation are always interested in learning about new materials and techniques. If we can provide information and not interfere, not try to push or pull their aesthetics, oh, if you use depression blue, no. This is their work. Again, coming from fine arts, being trained as a conservator, I truly believe in leaving that aesthetic self-righteousness at the door. I'm there as a visitor, and we're privileged to be able to work on this art and with that comes responsibility. Thanks.

Jason Church: Questions, comments in the audience?

Male: How old is Phil Webb roughly?

Dennis Montagna: I think he's about 61, probably.

Male: 61

Dennis Montagna: Yeah.

Male: That's 60, 61. Yup.

Ronald Harvey: Yeah. He's young.

Male: Yeah. He's young. He's a [inaudible 00:43:31].

Male: I have another quick question. Who called on Ronald and Dennis to go to North Carolina to work on the Simpson?

Dennis Montagna: It was [inaudible 00:43:50]. Yeah. There was an arts administrator who was initially working on the project and was putting it together. She had reached out to me with the National Park Service because she knew that we had an assistance program for outdoor sculpture. [crosstalk 00:44:07] Yeah.

Male: At the very local level in North Carolina. They reached out to National Park [crosstalk 00:44:15].

Dennis Montagna: Because we had an assistance program. I think they initially thought assistance [crosstalk 00:44:19] cash. Then, she found out that it didn't, but I said, "Well, but I think we can still help you anyway." That was how we first work [crosstalk 00:44:26].

Male: Who ultimately paid for your services, you and Ronald's services?

Dennis Montagna: Your tax dollars paid for my participation.

Male: But did the Wilson at the local level, their Arts Committee or Arts Council pay your services?
Ronald Harvey: No. I was paid through the Foundation, which was the group of five people in the city, in the town who were multi-generational people that were employed and did have money and saw the need to help. They were the ones. They were basically, it was coming out on Henry's pot.

Dennis Montagna: Yeah. They had already begun raising money at the same time. Actually, got me very nice an NEA grant which brought them this ability as well as money. They began to put some local money together through a local bank who made a contribution. Yeah, they were starting to put the pieces together around 2010

Ronald Harvey: Most of that funding was not for conservation, but it was for employment of these people to work to do the mechanical part. Again, it was a job-based initiative. Then, I was brought in periodically.

Male: The last thing, as you said, the park will open officially in November?

Anna Quindlen: Hi. I'm [Anna Quindlen 00:45:44]. I am also [inaudible 00:45:47], Jason. I worked in the cemeteries in New Orleans doing tomb conservation. I guess one of the interesting things around Phil's work is the idea of people using cemeteries as places to visit again. I guess the conservation aspect of that is that the more he's there maintaining the work, the more active the site is and the more engaged people are in like cemetery preservation and visiting it as a social site.

No. It's just the thought of like I love that aspect of it. I really love tomb and monument conservation. I really love ... There are some poppers fields in New Orleans that it's like ... Yeah. They're really cool. They have spaces there where families can make their own headstones for people. Yeah. It's not tombs. To say they're horribly maintained is an understatement, but they're really cool the way that people engage with the sites. I think it's really interesting too for us to be talking about that in this conservation. [crosstalk 00:46:56] I love to hear your thoughts on that.

Dennis Montagna: It's interesting there too because Kansas is a great environment because it's very clean and it's very dry. You've got a good shot in terms of longevity of materials. Being part of a government agency, I once asked Phil was, I said, "Well, did you get permission?" [crosstalk 00:47:13] . He said, "Nice. This guy from the city drove by. I was working in my garage. He stopped in." He said, "Are you the guy that's been making those things in the cemetery?" He said, "Yeah." Is that okay? He said, "Yeah, man, we really like him."

That was the extent of the whole permitting process. It's a windswept. The only cemetery in town, very minimal markers. These are not wealthy people, but he's enlivened it. I've just been fascinated to see where it goes from here.

Paula Addington: Hi. I'm Paula Addington from Chicago. I'm wondering how the artist, how Phil goes about negotiating with the family or not just to go ahead and do
Something on someone's grave. Does he ask for permission? I realize some of them are so old that probably no one there to ...

Dennis Montagna: Yeah. There's been no connection except for a couple of them, no connection with family. He's just basically done this on his own. There are some others where he's got his eye on a spot where he knows there's somebody. He'll go in advance of making it. He'll put a concrete pad. He stakes out a spot for the future, but yeah. He doesn't know the families. I'm really fascinated especially. I want to ask them more about this one, the one with a little girl where he went and put the pink. Well, between the first and second times I was there, that same family lost a child 60 years later.

There's another child grave right next to it. It's made out of stone. It looks like it's homemade. I said to Phil, "Did you make that?" He said, "No. The family must have made this themselves." They're incorporating this pink paint like Phil was. I don't think there's a dialogue in reality between people there at that point, but there certainly is a dialogue among memorials. That's one of the things, but yeah. There are some things I haven't wanted to plum too much with [inaudible 00:49:27]. I don't know him that well.

He began doing these things, I think, shortly after he lost a brother who he was very close to. I think that was one of the things that maybe began, but again, there's a lot of personal stuff I haven't really felt comfortable approaching.

Fred Scruton: Hi. I'm Fred Scruton. This is a little off-topic, but I know a great sorry about Vollis Simpson that is that Miss Jean is widowed. Their son told me. This may be well known, I don't know, that he got started back in the States by building something like a fan or air conditioning system for the house where they lived. There were parts of it that was spinning around and that those school buses would go by and the kids would get a great kick out of it.

Then, he appreciated the attention. That's what started him on the whole big monumental Whirligig gig, so to speak.

Dennis Montagna: I hadn't heard that, but it makes perfect sense. His affinity for kids is really strong.

Ronald Harvey: There's a similar story that when he was younger, this high school age, that he built some a fan for a window to move some air through the house because it's hot and humid there. There was a smoke issue. something was happening outside and his mother's like, "You can't do this anymore." He stopped. That came out of the window. It wasn't used, but again, it was a Whirligig system. It wasn't electric. We had to digress. When I was at the Milwaukee Public Museum as conservator, I had a volunteer who was in his in his early 80s who was a farmer and had been working with GE medical. They're really high-end x-ray.
This guy had no college education, but he was the most intuitive engineering-type person that I've ever met. He would help me with problems I would have in conservation. I was like, "How can I do this?" He'd do that farmer thing. He'd come up with a rational way of doing it that fit within the confines of the conservation. I just really learned to respect those people. My father [inaudible 00:51:48], it was a Bell Telephone scientist, who never went to college and just brilliant guy and held three patents. They're out there.

Dennis Montagna: There are a couple of guys who were working on the Vollis project doing most of the engineering component. We feel with them we've got the closest thing to Vollis that we're going to have because their brains work very much the like Vollis's brain works. They've been with the project the whole time and been ... They had their own little comments. It's like click and clack. [crosstalk 00:52:24] They've known each other forever. There's this really interesting byplay, but there's a lot of day-to-day problem-solving that was going on in there.

Ronald Harvey: Jeff, you should introduce yourself, please.

Jeff Bell: I'm Jeff Bell. I'm the executive director of the Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park and Museum, which is what the nonprofit is called now. Originally, it was a nonprofit called Wilson Downtown properties that started and, then at some point, they realized that this is really a standalone thing. Two and a half years ago, the organization I work for was created, but yes. The guys in conservation are incredible. They're also storytellers. They got to know Vollis.

When people come in, they can tell stories about Vollis and also spending time with them, they have their own interpretations. They've looked at these things so much that you can see these autobiographical references in the work, things that relate to Vollis and his life and things in the community and also the materials. They're very much a historical record of the things that are around in the area. Being able to hear that their take on all of these things is a pretty incredible thing.

Dennis Montagna: Shortly after the Vollis died, they put that little sign up on the board that says WWVD, What Would Vollis Do. I think we were very fortunate to have had him participate as much as we did.

Ronald Harvey: Troublemaker.

Female: Jason, just real quick. How did you actually meet Juanita? Was it a divine intervention?

Jason Church: No. Margaret Allen did an article at Folk Art Messenger years ago. I was reading it, I realized, "wait" and google-mapped it. It was like that's 20 minutes from here. I think I'll drive out and just drove out and saw it. It didn't stop. Then, Shane Rasmussen who's the head of the Folklife Center at the university that we're connected to had been out and met her once. He took me out. Like I was
telling Dr. Smith yesterday, I'm not going to stop at anybody's house unless I know him. That's just not something I would do. He took me out and after that, I go out there fairly recent regularly and visitor.

Female: One of the things we really haven't talked about, which may be slightly tangential, is how the relationship that we have with the artist is a little different than with an artist that is part of the mainstream and understands how the art world works capital A capital W. I find that you can't do a drive-by with these artists. You have to spend the time, and you're taking a lot from them. You're taking an amazing amount of their time even if you're talking to them while they're working. You're taking their time. you're asking them questions, and you're coming back again and again.

Therefore, in my humble opinion, you owe them, and you owe them to be respectful of their work and professional with how you treat it. You also owe them to come to their aid if they need it. That means that if somebody's threatening Juanita's place, then you're going to step up and try to help save it or you're going to help try to work with her to make it happen so that she's comfortable with what happens next with it. It's a really very different relationship. I find that, over the course of so many years working with some of the same artists for almost 20 years, not only am I seeing them every year, but I'm sending presents when the grandkids are born or I'm speaking at the funeral or you know what I mean.

It's just a very, very different relationship. I think we have to understand that if we're going to get into this, we need to know that we are making a commitment of our time as well because we can't just take. We have to give back to them in the way that they need us to give back to them.

Jason Church: Yeah. I promised Juanita a long time ago that if she does, that I'll camp out and keep anybody from tearing it down because she told me, "Oh when I died, the community will bulldoze this place." I said, "All right. I promise I'll be here like camp out and chain myself to and whatever," because, yeah, there's definitely that aspect.

Male: I actually have a question. We talked a lot about your influence on artists who you're working with. I'm wondering if you feel like your own practice as conservators have been influenced through working with living artists. If so, how?

Ronald Harvey: Well, again, because I came into the back door, that sense of respect for the artist and what the artist is creating and the creation process, I can tell you it will influence me when I stop doing conservation and start making sculpture again. That's down the road. I dreamed about it, but I think that ... Again, I think with conservation, for me, my view of conservation is that I'm so involved in the dance of the material, the artists, the aesthetics, the longevity, the ability to try and do unnatural acts, to extend what the life of these pieces. Because I was using weird materials in my work, it seems very, very familiar.
I feel more at home working with these artists or with their art than I did on some levels being in a lab with a table and wearing a lab coat and doing the swab thing. I love both, but mostly ... When Terry hired me, he said, "Well, you're working for us." I went, "You're paying me that I work for the art." I've had other clients say, "Well, can you do this?" I said, "No. The art's telling me it does not want to go that way."

It's reading the art and being that intermediary. Again, my training in the museum was that you are also the representative of the art. Often, I was the only voice in the room that was talking for the piece. I feel that way, went over the field all the time. I have to couch it. I can't be aggressive. If I draw a line in the sand and someone's on the other side, I'll never get them back. Education is a subversive activity. Let me have some time with them. Let me see if I can communicate to them what I'm seeing.

Sometimes, the advantage of being the outsider, the person from away, gives me more power so that I can hopefully do the right thing if that makes sense.

Dennis Montagna: There's something actually going with me just right now is all three of us coming out of traditions of creating and making things. My advanced degrees are in art history, but I started out as a studio major. I'm thinking back. The sculpture I was doing at Florida State, and I was using pieces of like horseshoe crab carcasses and string and all of them. You're a maker. That's where student is from. All of us are coming out of that, ultimately, out of that touchy stuff and making and thinking and designing. I think maybe that's probably true for a lot of people who they're gravitating toward this field.

Jason Church: For me, I'd only visited all the sites that we've been talking about these long deceased frozen somewhat stagnant sites. I didn't realize the change that these are living breathing sites and the artist is more than half the art themselves. I'll go there. I had small panic attacks because, well, I was just there at some of my favorite sculptures that were wooden. She's throwing on the ground. She's using them for support for something else. I love that. I'm done with that. Sometimes, I can talk her into letting me buy some of the older ones before she turns it into something else or throws them out, but it's evolved. You can't say, "No. No. You've got a stick with wood. They're really cool." [crosstalk 01:01:41].

Dennis Montagna: When you start thinking your influence is too overwhelming, realize that she'll do what she wants. She'll take ... They're the ones deciding. It's almost like a little arrogant of us to think that we're calling that shot. Ultimately, they're going to do what they want to do.

Ronald Harvey: They're strong-willed people. Never met an artist who was like, "Oh okay. I'll do that." You're never going to make it. I'm sorry. Step aside.

Jason Church: Yeah. She's at least half the artwork. Like I've been looking at Prophet Isaiah, but ... Fred introduced me and I went out too. It's an awesome site. We spent about
half an hour there, but I spent probably four hours with the Prophet. He's the art as much as that if it's not more.

Female: I work a lot with Joe Minter in his site in Birmingham, The African Village. It is Joe's getting older and his interests have taken him more and more away from the site, but bringing people there that have seen the photos and trying to get them interested in the site, I, as not a conservator, I struggle with language when people say, "Oh, this is in such rough shape," like how can you even save it or like what is the point or ... I'm just wondering if as conservators that have done this, you have any advice for how to convey not just the importance, which I can, but the feasibility or like how to just get people to stop saying immediately this is impossible, but open doors to productive conversations.

Jason Church: Almost anything can be saved. Send us pictures. Maybe, we can say, "Hey, this is all it would take," because, a lot of times, I don't think it ... A lot of times, there's very simple things like just cleaning things that will ... This site can't be. It's too far gone. Well, actually it's not that bad at all. Yeah. We have to see the ...

Ronald Harvey: Show them pictures of Pompeii before it was restored or any other amazing area or you can show them images from Grey Gardens that was just down the tubes. It was not ever coming except it has come back. It was just sold recently for gazillions of dollars. I think, again, it's that nuance how do you ... When I hear something say it can't, I always go, "Well, if that was true, most of the museums would be fairly empty." They are. You open a dialogue. Again, when you can engage them when you can bring them to a point where ... They may not and I've had clients say, "I don't agree, but I understand that you know this. I don't."

It's like you're giving me permission. But if you can engage them and if you can bring them to your side even a little bit, it's like, "Well, if your shoes get dirty, do you throw them away?" That's not art, but this is that this is not only art. It's space. It's this environment. It's this whole experience. I'm spending four years at Cushing and because it's a summer resort area. We would get people from around the world coming in.

I can tell you hands down. There was never a day if someone walked on campus I would stop or I would ... Sometimes, I had a crew of seven working. I'd take them around and show them something. They go, "Wow. I have no idea." I got them. They're in. They're hooked. Then, these lectures we were doing or these walk tours, we would get people coming back and bringing families. It's getting people engaged and connected and then say this can but we need help.

Dennis Montagna: Jeff, you can attest. That's one of the strengths in the Vollis Project is that there was always a space where the conservation work was being done that people could go see. You don't even know what possible effect you're having on the world at large because these people go off even though they're going back to their communities or whatever, but they're seeing that it's possible. They're seeing that it's doable. They get excited about it.
Years ago, probably 1989, Bologna did a conservation of their Big John Bologna fountain. This is the major fountain in the center of Bologna. They had an architectural competition to design a portable conservation studio, which was put right in the Piazza. It was his wooden structure. The conservatives were working on the fountain in the lower level. There was a gallery so you could go from outside as a visitor, go right up to a gallery and watch the work without ever interfering with the work, but you could participate. You can view it.

I think that was one of the best calling cards for conservation I’ve ever seen. I think that the Vollis project had a lot of that as well. I would advocate that if you can figure out a way of working that into it. It’s a great opportunity.

Male: Anyone else?

Dennis Montagna: Is that orange suck? Do we suck this entire orange dry now?

Ronald Harvey: Thank you, everyone.