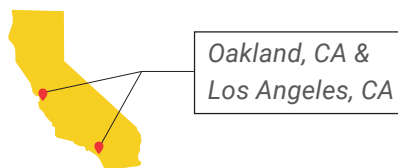


FLYING INTO THE WIND WITH A VILLAGE UNDER OUR WINGS

In conversation with
Phoebe Beasley and
Nashormeh Lindo

FEATURING **PHOEBE BEASLEY**
AND **NASHORMEH LINDO**

AS INTERVIEWED BY
CAITLIN FITZWATER,
CALIFORNIA ARTS COUNCIL



As colleagues on the California Arts Council for four years, Phoebe Beasley and Nashormeh Lindo traveled the state for public meetings on the topics of Council grants and policy. In February 2021, Beasley, an acclaimed mixed-media artist, and Lindo, an artist, educator, and past Council Chair, came together for a personal conversation about their lives and journeys as artists, educators, policy leaders, and Black women. ▶

BEGINNINGS

Phoebe Beasley: When I was in high school, my college counselor asked what major I planned to pursue. When I told her that I was planning to major in art, the first thing she did was laugh. I thought, “Did I say something funny?” When she recovered, she said, “There is no such thing as a Black artist, you need to understand that, and you need to get serious about what you’re planning to major in before I send these transcripts in. Come back tomorrow, because obviously you need to think about this a little and let me know what you decide.” And I left there with a feeling of anger and occasional rage. So I marched in there the next day and said: “You can put down art, because that’s what I’m planning to major in,” and I had nothing else to say to her. And I didn’t know it at the time, but Ohio University, where I would attend college, was the most welcoming place I could have imagined. No one there said, “There’s no such thing as a Black artist.”

Fast forward forty years — in 2005, Ohio University presented me with an honorary doctorate for all I accomplished since I graduated with my Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1965. I had the honor of being commencement speaker, and it was such a high point for me, to have my family in the audience, to have my stepmother there, who had encouraged me to go to college, for what she considered her proudest moment.



Phoebe Beasley with sister Annette B. Coleman and stepmother Mildred Gaines after Beasley delivered the morning and afternoon commencement addresses and received an honorary doctorate of fine arts from her alma mater, Ohio University, in June 2005.

Nashormeh Lindo: First, I’d like to say what an honor and pleasure it is to be in this conversation with you, Phoebe. Your reputation preceded you, and I’m thrilled we have the opportunity to work and exhibit together. I’ve always loved the arts. I liked to draw and make things as a child. I even drew on the walls. My dad worked as an industrial papermaker, and he would bring home odd remnants of paper-board for me to color on. Neither of my parents went to college, but they believed in and made sure my siblings and I got a good education. They especially encouraged me in the arts. We visited museums and libraries and there were always books in our home. Because we lived in Philadelphia, and because of who she was, I was aware of Marian Anderson, whom my father adored. He played her records and had an autographed program from one of her performances that he treasured. It was an affirmation and example of Black artistic excellence. But it wasn’t taught in the schools I attended.



One of Nashormeh Lindo’s earliest photos: A Sunday morning family portrait at Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church in Philadelphia.

I majored in art at the Philadelphia High School for Girls, where I was the lone Black girl in my art classes, but I had a supportive teacher. At Penn State University, I majored in art and again was the only Black student in my art classes. I began to seek out information on Black and women artists. I had no Black art teachers, and my white professors, two of whom were really wonderful, couldn’t tell me anything about African American artists, because they didn’t know any either. As a student artist, I was always being challenged about the content of my work, being asked why it had so many “political” images of Black people. It hadn’t occurred to me not

to depict these images, because they reflected who I was and what I cared about. This increased my need to know that someone who looked like me was also doing this art thing. I found them in books, not in the art history courses offered. I knew about artists and loved Picasso, Matisse, and Dalí. However, it would have meant so much to me to have learned how much they were influenced by African Art, which I didn't learn much about either. I graduated with a BA in Art, but for the most part, I hadn't felt particularly supported there.

After graduating, it took me ten years to return to Penn State, this time for an exhibition and symposium on — what else — Black Art. Many of the artists I'd encountered at Pattee Library seemed to have stepped out of those books and were walking around at my alma mater, in real time. It was eerie, but cathartic. I'm still exploring those issues of identity, family, and sociocultural history in my work, both visual and written.

BEING AN ARTIST

Beasley: To me, the way I see myself as an artist is so multifaceted — because it's not the only thing that defines me. It's just one of the major components of my life, as part of business or philosophy or understanding the human condition. As someone who has worked in policy for many years, including as an LA County Arts Commissioner and a California Arts Council member, to me, being an artist also means deciding on policy and procedure. All of these parts of me are inseparable; they are who I am and what I think. I go from one to another on a daily basis.

So when someone knows me as an artist, it gives me an idea that they have seen my art, or they have heard from other people that I'm an artist, and it's interesting to hear what they have to say. Sometimes, the first thing I hear is, "You don't look like an artist, you know; you don't dress like an artist," and so on. I almost have to convince people that I really did the artwork that's on the wall of the gallery. What matters is the art I create that is up on the wall, and if that speaks to you, then that's really the only thing that matters.

Lindo: Phoebe, the fact that you talk about being multifaceted resonates with me. I think that those of us who work on the administrative side of the arts often find ourselves criticized for working in this field. People seem to think that because one is not exclusively creating art 24/7, if one doesn't look, act, or speak a certain way, it somehow impacts one's ▶



Art by Nashormeh Lindo.

authenticity and relevance as an artist. I've noticed this from many people, including other artists. One can be an artist and also engage in advocacy and policy, which is an art form in its own right. It doesn't diminish your import and your ability to be creative and make art that is significant and impactful. Historically, most arts organizations have been started and run by artists, anyway. Out of necessity, most artists have to work for a steady salary, to pay for health benefits, rent, food, and everyday survival. This doesn't include art supplies or travel. I know I've had to. Romare Bearden was a social worker. Humbert Howard worked at the post office. You worked in radio. What about artists who have spouses or children? Those are also full-time jobs. Palmer Hayden was a janitor who painted in his kitchen. You make the time to do what you have to.

Similarly, I think about artists who have served on the California Arts Council. In fact, many of the first CAC members were artists. Peter Coyote, Noah Purifoy, Suzanne Jackson, Ruth Asawa were all trailblazers in this organization. This representation is important in decision-making, because it includes the perspective of practicing artists. It requires a great deal of necessary sacrifice. But look at what we accomplished during our tenure on the Council, establishing the importance of equity, introducing new grants programs for individual artists, fellowships for arts administrators of color, providing honoraria for panelists, and setting other priorities that have really impacted the field nationally. Having a seat at the table where critical decisions are made is essential to bringing about the necessary changes and innovations to the field. Artists can get amazing things done because we have the perspective of multifaceted lives that intersect in all kinds of interesting and wonderful ways.

There's an old cliché: "Those who can, do, and those who can't, teach." Perhaps this is true, for a few. But, in general, it's so wrong, in a myriad of ways, because effective teaching requires a certain kind of creative vision and "doing." I also don't think that teaching takes away from a person's creativity. In fact, it often enhances one's art practice. I think about people like you, Phoebe, and myself, and other artist / educators like Samella Lewis, Richard Mayhew, Mildred Howard, and Daisy Newman — we can name hundreds — all of whom have proven that adage is misleading. Plus, we have to be the examples for students, who need to see and hear from us. So many of us are multifaceted, multitalented, and the spaces we are in are necessary in order to make

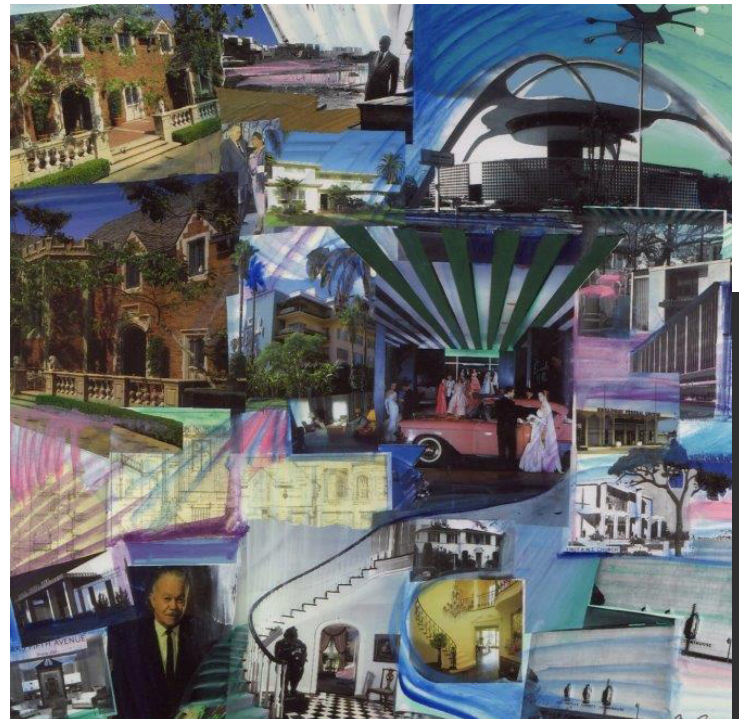


a living, to carry on traditions, and for our voices to be heard. Making art is a struggle. There is the element of time, but that's another sacrifice all artists have to consider. While it's hard, it's also meaningful and rewarding work. I love working with young people. Plus, sometimes we have fun.

Phoebe Beasley and Nashormeh Lindo with artist Mildred Howard (center).

THE NEXT GENERATION

Beasley: I started off as a hard-edge painter. Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock were my heroes. If you see my earlier work, it has torn canvas working from the back and the front of the canvas. And some people just love my earlier work, but at some point, I needed to get back to my spirituality. When I'm talking to students about Black artists, it brings up a real lack of awareness and understanding of our history. My generation started Black art classes and African American studies, and today many students seem ignorant about our history. The pain for me is that we spent time and effort in the '60s and the '70s; even before that, our parents ►



Art by Phoebe Beasley.
 Top: "Political Postures,"
 collage | 24 x 36 inches | 2002.

Bottom left: "Sunday
 in Birmingham,"
 collage | 24 x 48 inches | 1979.

Bottom right: "Wheels Down at LAX
 and View the Elegance and Style
 of Paul R. Williams, Architect,"
 collage | 36 x 36 inches | 2010.

and grandparents fought for this recognition. Now you have so many young people who — the only thing they know is yesterday. Literally what happened last week. But if you ask them about their history, about important people in our past, they don't know, even though the books have been written and the information is available.

My way of educating young people about our history is through my artwork. “Wheels Down at LAX and View the Elegance and Style of Paul R. Williams, Architect” is an example. Williams built the Theme building at Los Angeles International Airport; The Beverly Hills Hotel; homes of the rich and famous, like Frank Sinatra and Lucille Ball; and he was the first Black person to become a member of the American Institute of Architects in the 1920s. He and his in-laws also started the Broadway Federal Bank over seventy years ago, when people of color could not get loans from existing banks.

Lindo: I look for that structure whenever I fly into LAX. When I teach young people about African American art, I give them a broad historic base of architecture, literature, music, and examples of Black visual artists who have influenced my work. It's important for them to know that the world of the arts is rich and multifarious. One can get inspiration or insight from so many things. Everyone has the right to be creative and be assured they can express themselves from their own personal point of view. That's also why I think an educational pedagogy that incorporates science, technology, engineering, art, and math (STEAM) is imperative. It helps to know the connections, the possibilities, where one has come from, and what the legacy is, so it can endure. Those Black studies programs, exhibitions and books you mentioned, encouraged and enlightened a generation of artists and educators. Including a combination of the knowledge of different periods and disciplines gives all students an expansive picture, not only of Black creative expression, but of artistic production in general. These ideas continue to inform my personal art practice.

BLACK ARTISTS AND ART HISTORY

Lindo: For years Black artists have been left out of the art historical canon, in museums, academia, and the marketplace. I was astounded when I found out about the New Negro artists and the concept of a Harlem Renaissance. Henry Tanner, a 19th century artist was a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and lived



Cellist Yo-Yo Ma and Nashormeh Lindo in Oakland, 2018.

in Philadelphia, like me. He'd won high honors for his work, but nobody ever mentioned him to me. It blew my mind when I found out there was a long history of Black women artists, like Edmonia Lewis, Augusta Savage, and Betye Saar. As a visual artist, I've always loved printmaking and landscape painting, so, as a student, I studied Chinese landscapes. I wish I'd known about Edward Bannister, Robert Duncanson, and Norma Morgan, as well.

In school, I also didn't learn much about Black writers. My mother introduced me to James Baldwin. I was fortunate to have a job in a Black bookstore, where I was in heaven, and devoured novels and the poetry of Langston Hughes, Sonia Sanchez, and many others. In school, we read Richard Wright's *Native Son*, but many of my classmates considered it “ugly and painful.” I guess it was the rawness of a Black experience they couldn't handle. But we were expected to read Shakespeare, and those stories were deemed acceptable. Once, a friend sent me a one-sentence letter. It said, “You've got to

hear 'Grandma's Hands,' by Bill Withers, and you've got to read *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, by Maya Angelou." I'd never heard of either of them. But, like me, she was a young artist searching for the affirmation of seeing Black artists taken seriously. Years later, while a fellow at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, one of the curators asked if I had ever read *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston. I hadn't. Shocked, she insisted I get the book.

Reading Zora was a revelation. I knew this language. I knew the characters and their lives. Like Dr. Angelou's words, it helped me to understand how our experiences mattered and could be turned into art. My frustration was with why we hadn't been taught about these artists in our literature classes. Black writers were historically part of a community of artists that supported one another and practiced across the disciplines of theater, dance, music, and visual art. It would have given me so much pride, encouragement, and motivation to have these contributions formally acknowledged in school curriculums.

Beasley: It's true that we only knew Black artists who were singers, dancers, or in the theater. We knew Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis, but we didn't know Jacob Lawrence and Elizabeth Catlett. We didn't know about Black visual artists in order to say, "If they could do this, so can I." And it was clear when I was getting started that other artists around me didn't think I was serious. I would hear things like, "You're not serious about your work; you'll never be an important artist." (And, well, I'm still hearing that today — it depends on who's telling the story.)

But, at some point, African Americans began opening their own museums and galleries — we didn't care what white people had to say, because most of them had a Eurocentric focus on what we should think and create. They didn't understand the work, they didn't want to see it, they didn't want to show it because their clientele, for the most part, was white. So by opening our own galleries, as collectives of Black artists, that's what really got things started.

"YOU MUST DO IT"

Beasley: When I met Maya Angelou and she started collecting my works, telling her friends about it, wanting to host shows for me, she invited me to meet everybody she had written her books about that was

still alive. We took a car trip from Los Angeles to San Francisco and when we arrived, we went to a restaurant after our long drive. Maya wanted to sit at the bar before our table was ready. When we sat down, she asked, "Sister, what are you working on? What are you doing?" I didn't know what to say, because as an artist when you get these questions ... you're so tired, you're exhausted, you're not sure about your own art and your authenticity as an artist. So I said, "Well, you know, galleries are not interested in my work, and it's very difficult to have two careers." And she cut me off and said, "Stop it this instant; stop it. I have been very supportive of your work, I care about you, I care about your work. I have encouraged other people to buy your work. Sister, you must do it, you must do it. You must do it and understand how important it is."

By then her voice started to carry over the whole bar area. People around us stopped talking. I could feel everyone just paying attention — they all knew who Maya was and they were paying attention to this conversation. She said, "You are smart enough and educated enough to figure it out. That's what I expect you to do. I will only say this one more time: If you don't do it, God will take it from you." Well, to have your dear friend yell at you in a bar with many people ... I remember the waitress coming up and saying, "It's time for your table." And the tears! It was difficult to keep the tears from leaping from my eyes.

By the time I returned home, the clarity of Maya's words to me continued to resonate. Turning off my television for days was the start of finding more ▶



Oprah Winfrey hosting Phoebe Beasley's first Chicago solo exhibition in 1988 at the Isobel Neal Gallery. Friends attending the opening reception included Dr. Maya Angelou, Stedman Graham, and Gordon Parks.

time for my art, then spending less time on computers later joined the list of electronic devices — a work ethic still with me today.

ON DREAMS

Beasley: Dreams transport us. They awaken us to the fact that it's time to start setting the details in motion for reaching our goals. When I dream, I can think about the future, how I can do my work, be useful to my community, and surround myself with those who mirror the image I have for my own future.

Lindo: The first exhibit I had on the West Coast was called *Les Rêves - Dreams*. The work depicted my California “dreams.” I believe in the idea of poetic fantasy, that somehow dreams connect us to visions and ideas and emotions in our subconscious that become catalysts for creativity. There's also a spiritual connection. I think of dreaming as a verb — it's something that you do, that you hold in your heart and mind. Dreaming is not just a passive thing. Like Langston Hughes said, “Hold fast to dreams / For if dreams die / Life is a broken-winged bird / That cannot fly.” Dreams guide us to that knowing — that with a creative consciousness we can, indeed, fly. ■

