

## Lou Stovall Oral History Interview 10-12-2018

**Kay Kohl:** Today is October 12th, 2018. My name is Kay Kohl. I'm about to have a conversation today with Mr. Lou Stovall. He's an eminent artist in Washington, D.C., a master silkscreen printer and a longtime resident of Cleveland Park. Just to begin our conversation, could you say a little bit about where you were born, your childhood, and your early art education, school at that time.

**Lou Stovall:** Good morning. I am Lou Stovall, born in Athens, Georgia, 1937.

**Kay Kohl:** And you moved from Athens, Georgia north pretty early in your life.

**Lou Stovall:** Yes, at age of 4.

**Kay Kohl:** And where were you living as a young boy?

**Lou Stovall:** I was living in Springfield, Massachusetts, which is essentially where I grew up. And, let's see, that's 1937 to 1941.

**Kay Kohl:** What was school like there?

**Lou Stovall:** It was—well, I'm 81 years old now and I can hardly remember what school was

like in my early years.

**Kay Kohl:** Did you have a chance to just sort of realize your interest in art in your early years? In Springfield?

**Lou Stovall:** Yeah, there was a gentleman in my neighborhood—I guess I was probably age 7 or 8—and my mother arranged with him to give me some beginning art lessons.

**Kay Kohl:** Oh! That was your first...

**Lou Stovall:** That was my first experience with the art. I learned to draw horses.

**Kay Kohl:** Those are difficult.

**Lou Stovall:** Yeah. Well I wasn't very good at it at first but I had a consuming interest in drawing.

**Kay Kohl:** And did you have a chance in school to also advance your drawing interest?

**Lou Stovall:** Well school was fairly busy. Grammar school, especially. We were mostly involved with reading and writing.

**Kay Kohl:** Well, at what time do you think you realized that this was a passion that you really wanted to explore your life's work. So that was when you graduated from high school? What was your what was your aim?

**Lou Stovall:** Well I graduated from high school in nineteen fifty six.

**Kay Kohl:** And had you had any other art experience or printing experience before you left Springfield?

**Lou Stovall:** I had an art teacher in high school whose name was Helen Norgaard, and I had learned the basics of silkscreen printmaking from her. And my first experience with silkscreen at all was through a grocery store where there was kind of a shop in the basement of the grocery store and a gentleman by the name of Al LaPierre ran the little silkscreen workshop where he'd make grocery signs. And I helped him. I discovered it because I was sent down stairs to the little shop to get something, bags or something. And I stayed so long that the manager came looking for me. I had been watching the old sign painter who was silk screening and I was just sort of standing there watching, fascinated, and he said, "Don't just stand there, take this and put it over there." And I took whatever he gave me and put it over there, and by the time it turned around he was putting another one in my hand. So a couple hours later the manager came looking for me, and the old sign painter said, "This kid's pretty quick. So whenever I'm printing signs, I would like him to come and help." So I did that.

**Kay Kohl:** Oh, OK, so you had an introduction to silkscreened before you left Springfield.

**Lou Stovall:** Yeah.

**Kay Kohl:** So what brought you to D.C.? I mean, was it Howard University specifically, or—?

**Lou Stovall:** Yeah.

**Kay Kohl:** How did you hear about Howard?

**Lou Stovall:** I had a friend who was teaching English, and I had a consuming interest in writing little stories then. And Bill Gardner—that was his name—when he discovered that I had this particular interest and writing and so on, he wanted me to come to Washington where he was teaching at Howard University, and that maybe I would find Howard University to my liking.

**Lou Stovall:** But before that I had tended to Rhode Island School of Design and I didn't feel comfortable in Rhode Island. It was a difficult place for a young black student to be. And so I withdrew after my first semester there and I started a second semester, but then my father became very ill and died. And that I was needed back at home to help support the family. And so I did that I came back to return to Springfield and started working there. And I worked there for like five or six years at the grocery store primarily working as a grocery

clerk but also helping with the with the signs. And then came to Howard University which is where I first realized that that was home.

**Kay Kohl:** And what—you stayed at Howard until he received a Bachelor of Fine Arts—what was the atmosphere like at that time in the arts department?

**Lou Stovall:** At Howard?

**Kay Kohl:** At Howard.

**Lou Stovall:** Well I had a wonderful time at Howard. Professor Porter who was the head of the art department at Howard University at that particular time was just this wonderful very learned gentleman who would periodically say, "Lou, gather up whoever is free and let's go take a ride." And we would get into his car and he would drive us around Washington and point out the various historic buildings, but probably as important the equally important buildings that he thought were singular in texture and style color and so on. Because Washington at that time had a huge influence in its architecture from Europe. And so there were lots of areas that Professor Porter wanted us to go, and we did that.

**Kay Kohl:** That's sort of a whole architecture course.

**Lou Stovall:** Right, yeah.

**Kay Kohl:** So how did Howard influence your development as an artist?

**Lou Stovall:** Well, I had decided before I left Springfield that I was going to pursue making art. I had learned to make prints with my art teacher Helen Norgaard as I was leaving Springfield Technical High School. And she encouraged me to continue. So it was kind of a *fait accompli* that somehow making art would be my life's pursuit.

**Kay Kohl:** But what really helped to focus in on silkscreen print as your primary medium? Because you painted, you drew, you had many types of expertise.

**Lou Stovall:** Right. Well I was painting and drawing and making silkscreen prints which were very sort of minor because I was doing what my teacher had taught me to do. But I had also become the high school poster maker during those years. And whenever I would complete one, there would always be another theme or another idea for the next one. And so I pretty much spent my high school years reading, writing, and making and making posters.

**Kay Kohl:** When you graduated from Howard in the '60s, in the mid 60s, that was a really interesting time in Washington, D.C.

**Lou Stovall:** Yup.

**Kay Kohl:** And why did you decide to remain in the city?

**Lou Stovall:** Well I had found a community here that I was very interested in. There was certainly a need for someone like myself who was willing and capable of making the posters because we were doing protest posters during that time. I was making posters for the S.N.C.C. and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and we were protesting all kinds of things. And there were lots of volunteers that carried the posters and signs and so on and not so many people available to make them. So I was busy all of my time.

**Kay Kohl:** Where were you making these posters.

**Lou Stovall:** In the room of the art department. Professor Porter had given me a room to work in. And I pretty much worked in that room doing my own school assignments, plus whatever poster work that was needed.

**Kay Kohl:** Do you have a favorite poster from that time?

**Lou Stovall:** Well the paper poster from that time came after. I did a poster for the Peace Corps. That is my favorite poster.

**Kay Kohl:** Well, in the 1960s, the Washington School of color painting was very prominent. And I'm just wondering how you would describe the influence of that color school movement

on the D.C. art community as you saw it.

**Lou Stovall:** Well, in the mid '60s, the Washington Color School was had taken hold and the interest of making colorful designs. Otherwise paintings was something that everyone was interested in and I think my appeal, or the appeal to me, were these artists that I had met who were fascinated with silkscreen because silkscreened color is bright, and there was lots of variety of colors and so on. And of course you could make multiples. And so I was doing a lot of poster making in addition to some early silkscreen print making projects brought to me by the Washington artists at that particular time. And some of them who had money would pay small amounts of money to have their images made, and those who had no money, I did them at no charge.

**Kay Kohl:** Oh my goodness. Well, speaking of silkscreen printing, I don't think it's widely appreciated just how that takes place and what's involved. Can you say just a little bit about what the process is and why it's very special.

**Lou Stovall:** Well a good example of how I went about making the prints and posters for various artists is that they would come up with a drawing or design or something of that sort. And then I would cut stencils. And the stencils were cut on a double-layered semi-plastic material. So we would cut the design and then pull the part that we wanted to, what we call the positive, and leaving the rest open which was then melted into the silk and then color was pushed through that with a squeegee. And that was how the silkscreen prints were made.



**Kay Kohl:** That's very interesting. This was a very busy time as you've been alluding to politically and culturally. In 1968, you founded the workshop. And to say the least, this was a tumultuous time in the history of this country and anyone who starts projects such as this has to have a lot of confidence. And you were just a few years out of Howard at that time. Could you talk a little bit about the concept of the workshop?

**Lou Stovall:** Well I was an older student because I had had my high school years and then there was four or five years after that that I was making my own art, some of which included working in the community doing various posters and prints. And so on for whoever either wanted them or could afford them. And so 1968 arrived and I had this coterie of other young people around me who also were fascinated with silkscreen printmaking and wanted to learn it. And in order to learn I had them volunteering to help me do everything that I was doing. And so I had this sort of as I say a coterie of young artists or wannabe artists who were always there and that began the—well we called ourselves the workshop.

**Kay Kohl:** Well how did you make this happen? I mean it isn't...you need resources.

**Lou Stovall:** How did I make it happen. Well, I never needed money as such except to pay for the materials and so on. I was on scholarship at Howard and after Howard, what small amounts of money that were paid. I used that as my living expenses, but I worked. I was working 20 hours a day or something like that and that's what I was doing. And so it was

very easy to be involved making art all the time, and of course meeting new people. And some of the people who came to my workshop—we called it workshop—who were so fascinated with silkscreen printmaking and wanted their prints and ideas converted into prints and they also realized that the ones that were especially bright and colorful could be sold.

**Lou Stovall:** And so I had a wonderful friendship with Sam Gilliam and Gene Davis and Paul Reed at that particular time and that's what we did. We made the prints and a few posters but we were mostly making prints for the artists then who came.

**Kay Kohl:** It's a source of income, the multiples. I'd like to ask you another question then that your wife Di, short for Diana, is also an artist. How did you two meet?

**Lou Stovall:** From Howard University, the word kind of went out that I would be willing to teach anyone printmaking as I understood it who came forward and wanted to learn. One thing led to another, and I was invited to Columbus, Georgia, to give a silkscreen demonstration to the students there at the Columbus College of Art. And I met Di there. As a matter of fact, Di was one of the people who was instrumental in inviting me. And so I traveled to Georgia, met her family, and went to the Columbus College to demonstrate silkscreen. And I was so fascinated with—I say as a joke that I was fascinated with me and silkscreen—that we became friends. And a couple of years later, as I continued making silkscreens, Di moved to Washington in order to attend the Corcoran College of Art.

So her arrival at the Corcoran College was sort of not really blessed, because there was such competition during that time for who was going to make art and who was going to receive commissions and that kind of thing. So I had an arrangement with Di that she would help me with whatever I was doing. And in exchange for helping, I had gotten her a job at that particular time with the silkscreen studio where I was working. And she became the driver because I never learned to drive. And so she drove me wherever I needed to go with the signs and posters and so on. By that time we were primarily making real estate signs on metal and so Di was the principal driver and delivery person and she delivered me and whatever work we had accomplished.

**Kay Kohl:** Speaking of real estate, when did you move to Cleveland Park and what drew you to this neighborhood?

**Lou Stovall:** Well, I guess I was basically from my very beginning kind of a person who was attracted to people and friendships. And I had met a lot of people by that time. I guess I'd moved to Washington in 1962 and I was here for five or six years between Howard University and sort of getting started in the community and there were actually a huge number, an appreciable number of people who were also involved in silkscreen and wanted to learn it because it was a brand new medium and it with economical to do. People were very, very happy to learn it in exchange for lessons on how to do it. And so that's what happened there.

**Kay Kohl:** How did you find this particular home?

**Lou Stovall:** Well I also, in addition to making the posters for the community, found that I was attracted to D.C. politics and had met certain people and we also realized that we really had a community that we were that we really liked being involved in. Di and I had become married, dating first and one thing leading to another, and finally married. And we decided that we needed a permanent place to live and work. I just needed more space. At that particular time we were mostly centered around Dupont Circle. And Dupont Circle was where everything seemed to be happening. There were lots of artists around Dupont Circle. There was a gallery there and the man who was director of the gallery, whose name was Walter Hopps, and a friend of mine, whose name was Lloyd McNeill, were both fascinated with silkscreen prints and what was happening there and we decided that we should have a permanent place for working and. Places were not that much available. So we decided we would move north of Dupont Circle and we ended up in Cleveland Park where we found a wonderful home that was adequate, had enough room, had a three car garage, which we then doubled in size to make a permanent studio which is where we are now.

And it was a wonderful place to work and live. We had great neighbors who didn't seem to be bothered by all the activity that we brought up because we did bring a lot of activity. But there were also lots of young people who came from this area of Cleveland Park, you know, to work with us. And so it became, not a commune, because no one lived here except Di and myself, but it was kind of a 20-hour-a-day workspace. We had people, you know, coming

with assignments and supplies and materials, and we made whatever it was that we were making and then they would leave and then another group would come. And so it was wonderful during that time.

**Kay Kohl:** So when you moved to Cleveland park and you were settling in, do you remember who the first neighbors you met were and what your impression was?

**Lou Stovall:** Well our next door neighbors were Sam and Cathy Smith, who have since moved to Maine. But the other neighbors—all other names I can't recall—but they were really interested because we were active and interested. And one of the things that we always loved was having the school kids come to our studio and we would teach them sort of the rudiments of silkscreen.

**Kay Kohl:** These are kids from local schools?

**Lou Stovall:** Local schools, yeah.

**Kay Kohl:** How old?

**Lou Stovall:** Oh I can't think of their ages because I know I'm not good at that. They were grammar and elementary school. And we had a problem, a traffic problem, where the traffic moving along Reno Road was so fast that it was dangerous and there was in fact a couple of

accidents. So we were afraid that some little kids would be hit by cars and so on. And by that time I had been so, I guess, well established in Washington as kind of an artist community person and so on, and I had met and really adored my friendship with Marion Barry at that particular time. And so I asked Marion if he would come up and just sort of stand at the corner with me to see all the traffic and note how quickly and how fast people were driving. And so he said that he would do that and he came and did that twice. He did it once in the morning for the rush hour traffic and did it a second time in the afternoon. And so some of the neighbors who didn't know me as well as some others were so impressed with that, that I could get the mayor to come out and help slow the traffic down.

**Kay Kohl:** Tell us that. What did you do to slow it down?

**Lou Stovall:** He just stood there.

**Kay Kohl:** You didn't put in lights or anything?

**Lou Stovall:** No, because we were told that we couldn't have more light because that would be a traffic problem. And there was some sort of statute between Maryland and D.C. that we had to move the traffic, or the traffic had to be moved, as quickly and as efficiently as possible. But they didn't have to go speeding as it was. And so Marion's standing there on a corner with me with a couple of police cars automatically slowed the traffic down, and then signs were put in because it takes a while to get things like that done that would slow the

speed down. And then some lanes were dedicated as left turn lanes and so on. And that helped a lot.

**Kay Kohl:** Well it obviously had influence. Was there a lot of socializing on your street when you were—your neighbors?

**Lou Stovall:** Yeah. There was lots of socializing and we eventually had something that we call the Cleveland Park or Newark Street block party, where we invited a lot of the children who had come to our studio to work with us and to learn silkscreen. We had hot dog roasts and the parents came and so on. It was just a wonderful sense of community.

**Kay Kohl:** Did you find other artists in Cleveland Park eventually over the years?

**Lou Stovall:** Well, the other artists found me.

**Kay Kohl:** Oh, ok.

**Lou Stovall:** Because for some reason, where art is concerned, if someone is there making art, that's an attraction that becomes kind of almost like a magnet.

**Kay Kohl:** Who are a couple of the artists who you know, in the past or now?

**Lou Stovall:** Well, they've moved on.

**Kay Kohl:** Moved on, yeah. Well, you said, noted that you had been involved in D.C. government, that you followed D.C. government and I think you served on the Washington Arts Commission?

**Lou Stovall:** Yeah, it was called the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities.

**Kay Kohl:** OK. What would you say was, or how would you describe the work of that commission?

**Lou Stovall:** Well, the most notable thing that the commission did, because there were so many artists in Washington who were in need of help financially help especially that—I think it was Tony Gittens, who established something called the Art Bank. And the Commission then bought artwork from those artists and had a building where they stored it until some D.C. organization like the traffic department and also the police department and lots of the organizations that are considered city organizations, they needed artwork on their walls because the walls were empty and so a lot of the art that was purchased from the various artists—and I mean by that time there were several hundred, maybe more, artists who were all making posters or prints or paintings or whatever. And it was all purchased. And instead of the artists hoping for sales and for grants. The D.C. Commission decided they would purchase the artwork, which would be similar to having a grant, you know, or a gift. And



D.C. would receive something for the money that was given out. And so that was a wonderful thing that was done.

**Kay Kohl:** Well it certainly I'm sure was appreciated by the artists.

**Lou Stovall:** Totally appreciated. Yeah.

**Kay Kohl:** That's a very interesting idea. Give some dignity to the artists.

**Lou Stovall:** Exactly.

**Kay Kohl:** You are also a teacher, as we've heard in our conversation this morning. You've been willing to generously share your knowledge of silkscreen printing and I imagine you also have had some very dedicated students who have gone on to be also extraordinary silkscreen printers. What do you find most rewarding about being a teacher?

**Lou Stovall:** Well I don't really consider myself a teacher as such. What I consider is that anyone who wanted to learn something that I knew, or that I know how to do, I would be more than happy to show them how to do it. And so instead of teaching them I would share with them the experience of making whatever. So that became a much nicer way of doing it. It was kind of similar to the Commission of Art buying the art that artists made instead of just giving out grants. And so the city of Washington was collecting you know loads of art which

were even available to whoever was in a government building. So all the art was owned by the art by the D.C. Commission of the Arts of course. And when someone moved into a new office like the office of housing or whatever, you could go there or the people from housing would go to wherever that entity was having space and suggest to them things that they could have on their walls and so on.

**Kay Kohl:** Does that program still exist?

**Lou Stovall:** It does. Yeah. And the District Building right now, which is between 13th and 14th just off Pennsylvania Avenue, it's just loaded with art from D.C., from D.C. artists. And lucky for me. Lots of my work is considered you know because we tried to find art that was non-political and generously focused somehow on good living. And good education and so on. So the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities had a wonderful collection of artwork that was considered just really a plus for this area.

**Kay Kohl:** I can't imagine, and it still is. As a master silkscreen printer, you've collaborated with a number of artists. I mean many prominent artists. Joseph Elbers, Alexander Calder, Jacob Lawrence, Sam Gilliam, just to name a few, have all looked to commission you to print their work. What do you most enjoy about your chosen art?

**Lou Stovall:** Well, the simple answer is that I love working, and it doesn't, I think it doesn't really matter to me...At that particular time, when I was building my career as a print maker

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or as a professional print maker. It didn't really matter to me who I was working for or with as long as I was working and the art kept getting better and more defined. And the artists that I was attracted to or the artists who were attracted to me who were in Washington at that particular time really loved the idea of coming to the workshop and making new art and having lots of people in and out seeing it. Because the community really sort of treated our workshop as something that was great to have in the community. And so people would come and visit and bring their friends both from in town and out of town. And it was just a wonderful, you know, sort of thing.

**Kay Kohl:** An ongoing gallery.

**Lou Stovall:** Yeah.

**Kay Kohl:** So you were collaborating with very high level artists, and that's very demanding, I should imagine.

**Lou Stovall:** Yeah.

**Kay Kohl:** Can you talk just a little bit about these collaborations and how they went forward knowing that each one is different, but just the basics, how you collaborate?

**Lou Stovall:** Well I had decided that I indeed wanted to be the world's best silkscreen print

maker. But to do that, I needed ideas. And while I was very capable in terms of making the prints, I didn't have all the ideas because I was so busy perfecting my involvement with the medium. So getting ideas of what to print became a nice thing. So the artists who came to me to have their work done were impressed with the fact that whatever they wanted to do I was willing to do it because it was all like an adventure. And that's the way we treated it.

**Kay Kohl:** In terms of finding the right color...

**Lou Stovall:** The right color and the right style, the right textures and so on. Yeah.

**Kay Kohl:** Well I've really enjoyed this conversation and I would like you to, if you have anything to add or just comments that...

**Lou Stovall:** There was probably a few things that I should...Why don't we just go through the questions?

*[Break in recordings. Interview resumes...]*

**Lou Stovall:** Especially people who came to Washington to live were fascinated with the fact that there was actually an art movement here, however disorganized it might have been. But all you had to do was show up and get involved. And so that was something that was really a great attraction to people. And then we have a big art consciousness here in Washington.

**Kay Kohl:** You talking patrons, too?

**Lou Stovall:** No I'm talking about the National Gallery for instance, and the Phillips, and the Smithsonian. All of that was of interest to people because it contributed to this sort of mindset of what was going on in Washington that made this a wonderful city. And also the sharing of ideas and movements and so on.

Somehow we've managed to skip over one idea that I had was to say that the political movements like the antiwar things that we did, and the S.N.C.C., and the Civil Rights movement and so on—all of that sort of was part of the contributing factor of what made Washington a great place to be and people who came to Washington visit often ended up staying.

And as it is now, looking back on the so-called riots that we had in Washington, and when that was over, and then getting Washington rebuilt and reenergized. Lots of what is still going on was a wonderful thing. And so I have a feeling that we were involved in rebuilding the city, not only from its beginnings, because that was historic, but from a point of view of when the city from time to time was destroyed. Our most recent experience of Washington, D.C. being destroyed was from the late '60s. And then getting it restarted again and having certain sections of Washington rebuilt and reenergized.

It makes me think of one movement that was not really a movement but that had to do with caring, because that's a lot of what happens in Washington: that people cared about Washington and what had happened and who was here. And a good example is Martha's Table that gives education and food and places to meet for people who didn't have whatever was necessary to make a complete community. And I go back to how Marion Barry got started in Washington. We had a rodent problem. And so Marion got a bunch of his friends to go to certain alleys that were infested and clean them out and get the rodents out of there.

So there was this. There was a need for art work and so that's where we came in. But there was also a need for entertainment, especially music and so on, and so we had lots of music going on. But it wasn't all centered in a community. There were people who liked the go-go music. And it was just a wonderful thing to have this something started and then grow and become a part of Washington, D.C. and then associated, and Washington then benefited from the fact that there was so much going on all the time. There was always something else going on. And so we love that about Washington and I especially love being a part of it.

**Kay Kohl:** Well that's a very interesting comment. I thank you for taking the time to have this conversation.