Mississippi Oral History Project

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Lori K. Gordon

Interviewer: Beth Morgan

Volume 1048
2006
Biography

Born January 20, 1958, in South Dakota, Lori K. Gordon grew up in the Northern Plains and began moving west and south as a teenager, spending years in the Black Hills of South Dakota and the high desert of Arizona. She earned a bachelor’s degree in political science and a master’s degree in religious studies, while pursuing her love of art. Largely self-taught, Ms. Gordon works in mixed media, including graphite, acrylic, handmade paper, fabric, polymer clay, and “found” objects, many of which came from Hurricane Katrina’s debris. She has exhibited in galleries throughout the United States, has work in private and public collections throughout the world, including in Custer and Deadwood, South Dakota, and the Smithsonian Institution. In 1991, she settled in Clermont Harbor near Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, with her husband David “Cairo” Wheeler, a woodcarver and furniture maker.

One of Ms. Gordon’s major works from 2001 is an eight-foot by ten-foot biographical art quilt, “Labat: A Creole Legacy,” which has been acquired by the Smithsonian Institution for inclusion into their permanent collection; the quilt is based on the life of Bay St. Louis native Celestine Labat, a woman of color (Cherokee, African, Creole), beginning in the early 1900s, in the Deep South. The quilt is part one of a continuing work, The Labat Project. (An interview with Celestine Labat can be found in Volume 790, Part 3, pages 75-138.) Ms. Labat passed away at the age of 104 years in 2002, prior to Hurricane Katrina. Ms. Gordon drew, photographed, and interviewed Labat, scanned the texts and graphics into a computer, manipulated them with software, and transferred the images onto pieces of cloth; the cloth then was hand-sewn onto canvas, and the quilt was finished by painting the border and areas within the piece. The span of her life is thus represented. Ms. Gordon presented the quilt to Ms. Labat two weeks prior to Ms. Labat’s death, and also prior to Hurricane Katrina.

Ms. Gordon introduced her first mixed media series in 2001. In 2003, she began capturing local Mississippi Gulf Coast landscapes in acrylic until Hurricane Katrina’s eye roared into Waveland in 2005. Her home, studio, and all her supplies washed away in the thirty-five-foot storm surge and 150-mile-an-hour winds that destroyed her community. Ms. Gordon lost everything; her home was reduced to a concrete slab. Jobs in Bay St. Louis were practically nonexistent because Hurricane Katrina devastated the town. Five weeks after Katrina hit, Ms. Gordon began collecting pieces of rubble from Katrina’s debris piles and transformed them into art, creating The Katrina Collection, a series of mixed media collages and assemblages. The series first garnered national attention when MSNBC.COM featured the work in Rising from Ruin. National Public Radio featured the collection on All Things Considered. Additionally, she has exhibited The Katrina Collection in venues around the nation. Private collectors of Ms. Gordon’s work include former President Jimmy Carter and his wife Rosalynn. Pieces of The Katrina Collection are in public collections including the Mississippi Humanities Council, Thea Foundation, the William J. Clinton Foundation’s Art Across Arkansas, Hancock Medical Center, the
Safeco Corporate Collection, and the Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine.

Additionally, Ms. Gordon developed and facilitates the Collage D’Art workshop, a creative process incorporating several artistic methods and involving pour painting, monotype printmaking, polymer clay, and a selection of handmade papers. The method has been taught to students from six to sixty years of age who range from teachers of art to folks who have never picked up a paintbrush. Ms. Gordon continues to work on The Katrina Collection, and she is painting again since Hurricane Katrina in 2005; she also has begun work on a series of mixed media art assemblages called the Reliquary Series as she continues to work on The Labat Project.

Ms. Gordon’s art has been covered by news media across the United States. In 2005, her work was shown by MSNBC. She was interviewed by National Public Radio’s All Things Considered, and her work was featured on the Web sites of the Associated Press and CBS that same year. She has appeared in two documentaries, The Art of the Storm and Mississippi Son and on Mississippi Public Broadcasting. Ms. Gordon’s interview with Hannah Leatherbury of the Southern Arts Federation was podcast in 2007; Mississippi Public Broadcasting TV’s Mississippi Roads featured her work in 2008, as did the Christian Science Monitor. Magazines that have featured articles on her work include Art Gulf Coast, Going Coastal, South Mississippi Living, and Mississippi Magazine. In 2006, her work appeared in Walking on Water, a book about artists in Mississippi. Ms. Gordon has also produced a short documentary on her work, entitled Lori K. Gordon.

Exhibits of Ms. Gordon’s work have been featured by the South Arkansas Art Center, 2006; the Museum of the Southwest, 2007; Sumner Dene Gallery, 2008; Serenity Gallery in Bay St. Louis (BSL), Mississippi, 1999 through 2004; Quarter Moon Gallery in BSL, 2004 through 2005; The Artists of 220 Main in BSL, 2005 through 2008. She has had thirteen solo shows, over fifty group exhibitions, including the William J. Clinton Presidential exhibition and The Culture Project in New York City. In 2007, she was invited by Mississippi Arts Commission to be featured with other artists at the Southern Governors Convention. In 2008, she was invited to exhibit in The Katrina Museum in Gulfport, Mississippi.

Ms. Gordon has been awarded grants from Pollack-Krasner Foundation, 2005; Gottlieb Foundation, 2006; Andy Warhol Foundation, 2006; and Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, 2006. In 2007, she received the Artist Fellowship from Mississippi Arts Commission. In 2005 and 2006, she received commissions from Mississippi Humanities Council; in 2006 from State of Mississippi; in 2007 from Architects, Designers, and Planners for Social Responsibility; in 2008 from American Red Cross and Habitat for Humanity; and in 2007 from the “Spotlight on Success” event by March of Dimes. In 2006, she was invited to participate in Southern Artistry, sponsored by Southern Arts Federation and the Center for Arts Management and Technology at Carnegie Mellon.
Ms. Gordon has been a contributor to many charitable agencies; she has facilitated free presentations to groups around the United States including Elderhostel, Job Corps, Augsburg College, Northwestern State University’s Creole Heritage Center, New Hope Learning Center, schoolchildren, Katrina relief organizations, and art organizations. In 2004, she addressed the Mississippi House of Representatives on The Labat Project. Ms. Gordon has facilitated Collage D’Art workshops in shows around the United States, including Moss Beach, California, Minneapolis, Richmond, Virginia, and Mississippi. She is a founding member of The Artists of 220 Main, serving as publicity chair and board member from 2004 to 2008. She holds memberships in Del Ray Artisans, South Arkansas Arts Center, South Arts Federation, The Arts Hancock County, Ocean Springs Art Association, and the Museum of the Southwest. She has written on the arts for many publications, including Art Gulf Coast, and South Mississippi Living.

To see Ms. Gordon’s work, visit her Web site at: http://lorigordon.blogspot.com; The Katrina Collection in its entirety may be viewed there.
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Morgan: I am here with Lori Gordon in—are we still in Bay St. Louis, or are we in Waveland?

Gordon: No, neither, we’re in Clermont Harbor.

Morgan: We’re in Clermont Harbor doing this interview and Lori is an artist who has worked off the Coast. Tell me a little bit about the community prior to Katrina here in Clermont.

Gordon: Clermont Harbor is a very small, unincorporated community just west of Waveland. There’s Buccaneer State Park is in between Waveland and Clermont Harbor. We’re right on the beach. The town is about four blocks along the beach and goes back about another four blocks to the railroad track, so it’s quite small. A working class community, very quiet, very safe feeling. I used to feel completely comfortable getting on my bike at two o’clock in the morning and taking a ride to the beach, and really a beautiful place. Very lush, very wooded, very small, modest houses, no apartment complexes, one little bitty church, which I saw the new one being built down the road a way.

Morgan: And what was the population, did you know?

Gordon: No, except a lot of people here had little summer places, people from New Orleans, so it varied quite a bit but we, I’m sure we never made it up to 1,000.

Morgan: Did you grow up on the Coast?

Gordon: No, I grew up in South Dakota. I came here sixteen years ago, fell in love with it. Came home, spent two days, basically turned around and went home and packed my bags, and I’ve been here since and that’s about sixteen, seventeen years.

Morgan: And here on the Coast.

Gordon: Right here in Clermont Harbor.
Morgan: All right, so you had weathered hurricanes before. Was this your first taste of a hurricane?

Gordon: No, no, Katrina was not. It was my first taste of anything like this, like everybody else’s, I guess. We’re very low here. My slab that my house used to be on was only seven feet above sea level, so every single storm we got I evacuated for. I was always very nervous about it, so we evacuated for years. We were only flooded one other time a couple of years ago and we only got an inch of water in the house, and that was a pretty major storm. It was either Isidore or the one that came right before Isidore; there were two right in a row that year.

Morgan: Where did you evacuate to?

Gordon: Generally, I have just gone up to a highway owned by a friend. It’s up on Highway 90, the corner of Highway 90 and Highway 603. It used to be the Holiday Inn. Every other time I’ve gone there. I’ve never—it’s not very far, but you know every one brought all their vehicles up in those parking lots along the highway there.

Morgan: So this whole community would evacuate?

Gordon: Oh yeah, yeah, very few people would stick around because we’re so low. This particular storm I had my daughter and granddaughter with me and we delayed too long in deciding where we were going to go since we had the baby with us, and missed out in getting a room at that motel and it is only because of that that we were left with anything at all. We saved two vehicles. Everybody that evacuated to that motel, they had nine feet of water up there in the highway. Everybody had to get up to the second floor when the water started coming in and all the cars were destroyed. So we were real lucky with that mistake about not getting a room in time.

Morgan: So your procedures for evacuating are pretty much in place.

Gordon: Oh yeah.

Morgan: When did you leave?

Gordon: For this particular storm? We left Sunday early afternoon.

Morgan: Where did you end up?

Gordon: Oh, we went a long ways this time. We went up to Diamondhead which is just on the other side of Interstate 10, about six miles from here. And Diamondhead was a good place for us. We were very lucky in the location we were in. I have other friends in Diamondhead who lived on the water and their places are completely gone.

Morgan: Describe the house prior to Katrina. Did you have a studio on the space, too?
Gordon: Yeah, yeah that was great. OK, we’re on a corner lot here. The house was on a slab. It wasn’t a large house and it was a very modest house, 1400 square feet but nice open ceilings, you know, cathedral ceilings, and a very lush backyard. We had a little pond back there and we made a walkway and had a little bayou that went across there. So you’d walk in the back and walk across this little bridge that we built, and there was a big bamboo grove back there. And we built a studio right in the middle of the bamboo grove and the studio was up on pilings. That was probably about four feet off the ground, which put its bottom floor about level with the slab that the house was on. Halfway in between the house and the studio, we had a tree house which was thirteen feet off the ground. It was a beautiful little tree house. I used to love to go up there and just read and spend some time. And then from the studio the land took a—our property line, it’s a—our property’s an L-shaped property—so from the studio you would head west and there was a little larger bayou back there. We had a little pier where we could catch crabs and shrimp, then get in our little boat and head out to the Gulf. So it’s a really, really beautiful, beautiful place and I knew how lucky I was.

Morgan: So did the bamboo grove survive?

Gordon: Little bits and pieces of it, you know, some of it will come back.

Morgan: Because bamboo is usually pretty indestructible, if anything—

Gordon: Yeah.

Morgan: And that’s just amazing. Well, in Diamondhead, did you watch it on the news? How did you keep track of the storm?

Gordon: We had the weather radio. Sunday afternoon—now, I evacuated up there with my husband, two other women, and we stayed with a couple up there, so there were six of us. And we got up there Sunday afternoon and we were all having second thoughts because the storm was just so strong and it was still heading straight towards us.

Morgan: Did you think you hadn’t gone far enough?

Gordon: Yeah, we were really worried about it. But at that point, it was just too late. The traffic was so bad you couldn’t get out. And we thought, well, if we try and leave now, this storm is going to hit while we’re in a car someplace. So we thought, “OK, well, we made our decision, now we have to live with it,” and we all went to bed that evening. And I heard the wind picking up about two o’clock in the morning. By four o’clock it was really blowing and just blew, all day long. It was a long day, but we—

Morgan: That Monday.
Gordon: Yeah, that Monday. We did have the weather radio and so we were able to get reports out of Gulfport and Biloxi, the TV channel over there, but we weren’t hearing anything from this end of the beach, from Biloxi—I mean, from Bay St. Louis and Waveland, and that was very frightening that we weren’t even being mentioned. I think two times during the course of the day, they said, “We cannot get any word from down here,” which was really scary. That was a tough one. And I remember the first time that we did hear anything, I don’t remember when it was. I guess it was, I think it was Tuesday, we tried to get out of Diamondhead Tuesday and we couldn’t get out, but they interviewed—the TV station interviewed Gene Taylor, our representative from down here, and he actually said the words Clermont Harbor. So we, it was so strange just hearing someone actually say the words. That was the first time that I really—

Morgan: It still existed in some form.

Gordon: Yes, yes, even only in someone’s verbal pronouncement it was still there. That was, that was very strange. That was a tough, tough moment, but a good one at the same time. Yeah.

Morgan: And when will you be able to get back to Clermont?

Gordon: Oh, well, I don’t know. You can see there are three people rebuilding in Clermont right—oh, when was I able to?

Morgan: Yes.

Gordon: Oh, I’m so sorry.

Morgan: Yes, that’s OK.

Gordon: I misunderstood you. We tried on Wednesday, two days after the storm and we could not get anyplace close, the water was still way too high. So then we went to Florida on Thursday morning, bought this little camper, came home Friday, so I think it was Saturday, five or six days after the storm. You know, what the strange thing about that is, I have absolutely no memory of getting here. I don’t know which route, I don’t know how we got through, I do not remember seeing this at all for the first time, it’s like I was completely gone. I guess it’s like, I don’t know, maybe a defensive kind of mechanism, I don’t know, very strange.

Morgan: But you had enough acceptance that you went and bought a trailer before coming and seeing that your house was gone or you just knew.

Gordon: Yeah, yeah we knew, we just knew. After seeing—we got down to Bay St. Louis and Waveland the second day after the storm, and when you saw the beach there, I mean it was, we knew there’d be nothing there at all. And (laughs) we were right; there was not, there wasn’t.
Morgan: Well, describe the trailer. Your trailer’s on your lot here.

Gordon: Um-hm.

Morgan: Describe it.

Gordon: Well, we have—OK, we have this little camper that we’re sitting in right now and this is, I think it’s eight feet wide by twenty-two feet long. Very tiny, but it’s the one we bought in Florida and didn’t know if we were making the right decision. I mean, we didn’t know if we’d be getting any insurance and it was like to spend $11,000 on a little tin can was really scary. And it’s used, I mean, it was the best thing we could find, the cheapest thing, so we have this. And then we got a FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] trailer; I believe we got that at the end of December and so we’re able to live in the FEMA trailer and just have it for a living space. And it’s a little bit bigger than this, but not much. And then we use this for storage and I have my computer set up here so I do a lot of my business out here, and that’s been a lifesaver to have this extra space. So all we do is live over there and it’s not cluttered with all this stuff.

Morgan: Tell me a little bit about your art and what type of art you produce.

Gordon: The two years previous to the storm, I was mostly painting. I had decided I just wanted to learn how to paint. And I had painted a little bit in the past, but not very much. So I was doing landscape paintings. In a period before that two years, I had done some mixed-media work. So when the storm hit, I saved quite a bit of my completed work because, I mean, it was in galleries that did OK, but of course everything, you know, like forty years worth of art supplies, my husband had all of his tools, all of his supplies, of course those were completely gone. And I spent the first five weeks after the storm doing what everybody else was doing standing in line for FEMA and SBA [Small Business Administration], and trying to get a hold of an insurance agent, and mucking out. I was staying with a friend who lived up far from Highway 603 and their house floated away, but they had a warehouse, like a studio warehouse building that was full of—they had twelve feet of water up there, five miles from the beach, twelve feet of water. So, of course, all the insulation and the sheetrock came down, and all that stinking mud and dead animals, and so we spent five weeks doing that. My husband went to Minnesota right away after the storm to go to work because I just—I didn’t know if we’d have any money at all.

Morgan: And what does your husband do?

Gordon: Well, he’s retired. He just does his art now, but he’s been in construction all his life. He’s worked all over the world.

Morgan: So he went to Minnesota to do construction—
Gordon: Yeah.

Morgan: —to draw a paycheck during this time.

Gordon: Exactly. So, I was mucking out that other building for a shelter for us and doing all the standing-in-line stuff. But about five weeks after the storm, I started feeling like I really needed to create something. I really just kind of felt like I was losing it emotionally and I just needed to be doing something creative, something positive, something good, and I didn’t have any paints or paintbrushes, but I sure had a lot of debris piles. So I got some glue and we did keep one of my husband’s tools—this is funny—when we left, I packed everything I could in the van because I knew this was going to be a bad one. And he packed one thing: he packed his battery-operated screw gun so he could take the plywood off of the front door when we got home. (laughter) So I bought some glue and I had that screw gun, and I found some rusty screws and I just started putting things together, and that was my first good day after the storm. It was five weeks after the storm the day I made a piece and it just, oh, it was just a lifesaver, an absolute psychological lifesaver for me.

Morgan: Describe the first piece.

Gordon: My first piece I called—I can’t remember—and, you know, I did like three or four that first day, but I think the very first one was a piece called “Southern Sundance.” And it was just debris that I had found that all pretty much came from my yard. It had a—

Morgan: Could you recognize, was it your debris or could you recognize where the debris had come from?

Gordon: It was mostly my debris; stuff that I had picked up in the backyard. It was odd the things that stayed, the things that you could find. For instance, that first day I came home, there was no sign of the house, no sign of the tree house except the steel spiral staircase, that’s still standing. It looks, you know, it’s leaning a little bit. No sign of the studio. We still haven’t been able to identify a part of our house, any part as being, you know, our wall or our roof section. But I had this piece of stained glass, it was about eight by ten inches that a friend had made for me twenty-five years ago. And I had my husband cut out a hole for it in our front door. It was a solid wood door. He mounted it in the door, put, you know, molding, like picture frame stuff around the outside and the inside, and that first day we came home, nothing at all left except in the mud behind the house, laying there undamaged, was that piece of stained glass. Now, how it got out of that door and in the backyard when everything else went, is—

Morgan: And didn’t turn into just colored sand.

Gordon: Yes, exactly. It’s just, it’s incredible. And I’ve heard so many of those kinds of stories. So I did, you know, I found pieces of things like this Southern Sundance piece; it’s centered around a fossilized—now I can’t—like a predecessor to
the Nautilus, I can’t think of what it’s called right now. And it had an old piece of iron and it did have some pieces of painted metal that I got from the debris outside a shop on Main Street in Bay St. Louis. I had the owners of two different gift stores, antique store kind of places, give me permission to go through that rubble, and so I’d had a few pieces from that.

**Morgan:** How did they feel about you going through rubble to make art?

**Gordon:** I have had the most incredible positive reaction. I have never had anyone that I asked say no. In fact, most of the people, including the two shops in downtown Bay St. Louis, when I asked them, they said, “Well, you can go inside, too, I mean it’s yours, you just do whatever you can with it.” Most people have been very, very pleased to something be salvaged because it’s so overwhelming to see so much destruction. I walked, I was driving by on, I think it was on Hancock Street in Bay St. Louis one day not too long after the storm, and there was a debris pile in the front yard. And I was very, very careful about never going on private property without permission. I just decided at the beginning I just had to be really strict with myself, no matter how great something looked. If it wasn’t on the street, I had to have permission. So there was a woman outside in this yard. I stopped and told her what I was doing, and asked if I could look through the rubble. And she said, “Well, sure, honey, but boy, wait till you see the backyard, come here.” And I spent, I think I went three or four times back to her backyard and got some great stuff. So people have had a really good positive attitude about it. I have had two people in the nine months since the storm that had come into the gallery and said, “You know, I just, I don’t want to be reminded. I wouldn’t want any of this.” And that’s two out of probably several thousand, so most people see something really positive about it.

**Morgan:** And where are you right now in your house rebuilding? What are your plans right now?

**Gordon:** None. We are absolutely in limbo. I’m looking for property up in the country. That doesn’t mean we’ve decided we can’t rebuild here, but it’s looking very, very negative. We did get some insurance money. In fact, we got everything we were insured for, so we have been extremely fortunate. However, we were very underinsured. So we have a little bit of money, so we have, you know, some options, but FEMA is still saying that it’s going to be a year before they come up with some final elevation requirements. And I’m not a gambler and this storm made me even less of a gambler. I am not going to build a thing until I know exactly how high I have to be. So, we’ll have to wait for that. We’re also waiting to find out if we’ll be able to be insured right in this—this is like the worse location to be and it’s so low, it’s two blocks from the beach, so we don’t know if we can get insurance, we don’t know how high we have to go. If we *can* get insurance, I don’t know if it’ll be affordable. I mean, the wind pool, you know, they’re asking for a 398 percent increase and we were having a hard time paying the premiums before the storm. So there’s those three things, but the real biggie to me is condo development down here. We’ve been fighting condo and casino development for a year and a half. My husband and I and
three other people here in Clermont have a lawsuit against the county for a zoning change that they put in place. Let’s see, the storm was in August, so that zoning change went in place the last of April, just a few months before the storm. They’ve rezoned this 1000 acres right down here to unlimited heights and unlimited density condo and casino development. And I think we had a fighting chance before the storm to, if not fight that off, at least have some influence, you know, on how high they went. Now I don’t think we have a chance in hell anymore. The county and the state needs the money so badly that—I mean, our case is before the state supreme court now. We’re waiting for them to listen to it and I suppose, perhaps, they could rule in our favor, but I just don’t think so.

**Morgan:** How did you do in the circuit court?

**Gordon:** Ruled against.

**Morgan:** OK, and so then you appealed that.

**Gordon:** Right. And I just, I love this place because of its rural nature. I don’t want to have fifty-story condos for neighbors and casinos for neighbors. It’s just not my idea of the way to live.

**Morgan:** Have you been able to speak to any of your neighbors to get a sense that they’re staying or going?

**Gordon:** Not really. You can see right next door, our neighbor Dan decided to rebuild, but he had kind of a unique situation. They didn’t have any insurance, but he’s a carpenter, he had a portable sawmill, he just started taking, after the storm, all those trees that came down, he cut them up into lumber and on the weekends he’s been building himself a house and it’s costing him almost nothing because he had all the lumber, he has all the skills. And there are two other houses in Clermont Harbor that are being built right now and the church.

**Morgan:** So they’re just taking a chance that they’re going to guess that it’s going to be high enough?

**Gordon:** Yeah. Yeah, he’s gambling over this, and he’s up pretty high and he may be OK, but I don’t think he’s planning on insuring that one either. It’s, you know, it’s all his own labor, his own materials, so it probably wouldn’t make sense for him to pay those really high rates since he doesn’t have a whole lot of cash into it.

**Morgan:** And I see you’ve got a tent. Did y’all do some camping out here during part of that time?

**Gordon:** No, I never did. I set the tent up right away because I wanted to be out here, I wanted to be close, and that’s when my husband was in Minnesota and he kind of vetoed that. (laughter) He didn’t want me out here by myself.
Morgan: Too Girl Scouty.

Gordon: Yeah, yeah, too much for him, so we’ve just been using it for storage.

Morgan: And your husband has a wood shop, a kind of open-air woodshop set up.

Gordon: (laughter) That’s what he’s got now.

Morgan: Can you describe that?

Gordon: Sure. On our slab we have one FEMA trailer, one tent, and several tables that are just salvage tables that are made from scraps of wood, and the few tools that he has bought since the storm, and he just works outside. Oh, he’s got a big fan somebody gave him and he bought another fan, so that’s his studio. His is completely open air but at least it’s at home; I have to drive five miles to mine.

Morgan: And where’s your studio now?

Gordon: It is on the same property where I lived for three months after the storm, which is on Bayou LaCroix Road, that’s just off [Highway] 603 a mile south of the interstate. My friends, that’s where the warehouse was where we were mucking everything out. Their garage stood; that was on a slab right next to the house which was on pilings. So the house went with the storm and the garage had a big hole in the roof and the front doors are gone and part of one wall is gone, but it’s a structure and that’s where I started hauling all my debris and that’s where I do my work is up there. Except right now this time of year I try and get up there as soon as it gets light because by ten o’clock it is so hot up there and I don’t have any power so, you know, I can’t have a fan or anything, but that’s it. Six to ten are about my hours at that studio.

Morgan: So you’re doing all assemblage work. Is that the right word?

Gordon: Yeah, assemblage is right. Yeah, mixed media, all of that works. Yeah, that’s basically—I’m doing a little bit of painting here and there, but not much, just little bitty paintings for little studies, but it’s mostly that. The collection is up to, I think, 175 pieces, 62-63 percent have sold, which is a great, great percentage.

Morgan: Now, how are you marketing?

Gordon: I am marketing two ways; number one through the gallery and I’ve had some really good, good press. We were able to form a cooperative gallery, there’s eleven of us, and reopen in a location, a building three blocks from the beach in Bay St. Louis. We reopen the first week in October, so we were only out for not very long. Now, we’ve been very fortunate with that. And we have a—since we’ve been the only place open all this time we’ve had a lot of people come through there. So that’s in a very good venue. I am also selling it on the Internet and I’m amazed. I
thought I would get a good response down here with the work, but I am getting a great response all over the country. I have sold over the Internet and shipped work from Minnesota to the East Coast, the West Coast, and all over. That’s been terrific. Also, there have been a lot of people in the art world all around the country that have reached out to us and I’ve sent work to a lot of different galleries. These galleries are not charging us any commission, for the most part, it’s just a really wonderful outreach program, so I’ve been very lucky.

Morgan: Do the people who buy the work have any comments for you or have they—

Gordon: Yeah, the people that are interested are interested because they’ve got a real emotional hold to the work and people are just absolutely thrilled with it. I mean, they get what it’s about and some people don’t get it at all. They look and they see a bunch of junk glued together and that’s all, you know, and, I mean, at the bottom level, that’s pretty much what it is. (laughter) But the people that are drawn to it are drawn to it because they understand that it’s all about rebirth, it’s all about picking up the pieces, you know, lemonade from lemons, salvaging something from an awful experience, turning ugly stuff into things of beauty again, and they get that, and a lot of people are getting it.

Morgan: Are you still collecting bits and pieces of—

Gordon: I’m trying not to, Beth, I’m trying really hard. Actually, about three months ago I quit actively looking. That doesn’t mean that if I drive by a pile of stuff on the street that I know is going to go the landfill the next day, if I see something interesting as I’m driving by, I stop. So every now and then I’m picking up a little bit. But I don’t—my main problem is I don’t have the space. The garage is overflowing; I can’t work in the garage anymore and it’s spilled out on the driveway and it looks awful. I mean these—Steve and Brenda are such great friends to let me—they had their place all cleaned up and now I’ve got this garage with all this trash laying around, so I just, I basically had to kind of quit.

Morgan: When June first rolled around this year, there was all of the drum roll of hurricane season opening. Did you find yourself anxious about June first, or were you when hurricane season opened this year?

Gordon: I was right here. You know, I’ve traveled a little bit since the storm and, no, not the—I probably didn’t even realize it was June first, I’ve been just so crazy busy. I am very jittery right now about leaving and I will be leaving in two days for at least four weeks and I’m very nervous about it. In fact, if I did not have a commitment to do this workshop where I’m going, I wouldn’t go because I’m really, really anxious about it. And I think it’s, um, it’s not so much that I’m worried about my husband, I mean, he’s a smart guy, I know he can take care of himself, I think it’s just this some kind of a weird psychological thing where if I’m a long ways away I don’t feel in control. And somehow if I’m here, I just feel better. And I have felt that since the
storm. I didn’t like leaving the times I have left. I kind of thought by now I’d be over it, and it’s worse now than it has been and it’s because we’re back in another hurricane season.

Morgan: Tell me a little bit about the regrouping of the community. Have neighbors been meeting together, have you been able to see your neighbors on a regular basis?

Gordon: Yeah, not so much right here in Clermont Harbor because the reason Tyrone(?) and I loved it so much here is because we were able to be really isolated. I feel when I’m home this is my private space and we never really got to know a lot of our neighbors. You know, the neighbors right here and right across the street, but basically we don’t have too many people over, so Clermont Harbor was like my sanctuary. The larger communities, though, Waveland, Bay St. Louis, I mean, this whole area and even extending down towards Gulfport and Biloxi, it has been a remarkable, remarkable experience to see how everyone has pulled together. I wouldn’t have been—as hard it was here, I wouldn’t have been any place else in these months since the storm than right here because it’s been great. And I see it particularly within the arts community of Bay St. Louis and Waveland because I’m so involved there, but I see it as a—

Morgan: Tell me, in the days after the storm, just kind of on a day-to-day basis getting water and getting food, what were those days like?

Gordon: Let’s see, how can I describe this? I was extremely, extremely fortunate. Number one, I had a car; most people down here did not have a car, which made it very difficult to get things that you needed.

Morgan: Well, what did you do for gas?

Gordon: Well, I had—when I went to Florida, two days after the storm, I came home not only with this little camper but with a whole bunch—I think I bought a dozen, five—

Morgan: Five-gallon.

Gordon: Yeah, it must be five-gallon cans. And so I brought that all back and I shared, you know, with the people that I was staying with, but I really horded it and so I’ve—you know you were careful and I never did have to stand or sit in a very long line for gasoline, so I was very fortunate there. The place where I was staying—well, I did spend about five or six nights sleeping on the asphalt at my friend’s motel, when I first came back from Florida. I had this little camper but, of course, no power, no generator and you could not sleep in here, I mean the heat was just, it was suffocating. But at that motel, it was situated right next to the Wal-Mart and the Sav-a-Center, and so there were supplies right there immediately after the storm. The people, whoever the manager was at Wal-Mart [Ray Cox], they—I heard stories, I never went over there, but they were just handing out supplies. There were lines of people, people
would come up to the door that they had roped off and they’d say, “I need a pair of shoes and I need some water and I need some baby formula,” and the people at Wal-Mart would go, you know, get the stuff, bring it out. At Sav-a-Center all that glass was broken out and all this stuff had come out into the parking lot, but there were still freezers full of food and people were going in there and getting what they needed. Nobody felt it was looting. And so we had the grocery store right there. We had all these people that were stranded at the motel and all these people at the motel, they just, the owners of the motel, Steve and Jim Lehtie(?)—no, Steve and Bill Lehtie, and their brother Jim, they organized a crew right after the storm and said, “OK, this is what we’ve got to do.” For instance, they had a couple of guys that volunteered. Every morning they would fill up buckets of water from the swimming pool and bring one bucket to each room for the toilet and they’d say, “OK, here’s your bucket for the day. Now, if you need more, you’ll have to get it yourself.” But so everybody was able to at least have a toilet that would flush, you know, once or twice a day. Same thing with the food, people would go over to the Sav-a-Center and they’d get the food, somebody found some barbecue grills and they’d cook out by the pool and feed everybody. It was really, really something. So that was fairly easy that first week when I was sleeping outside there at the motel. Then after that, we went up to my friend Steve and Brenda’s house and they had an artesian well, so it was a trickle but it was an artesian well, so we knew it was safe, so we had water. At some point we went up to Picayune and found a pump, so after a week or so we had water that came out, more than a trickle. So things just, you know, slowly got better and better, but I was never in a real desperate situation like a lot of people were.

Morgan: The Wal-Mart, is that where the big tent city eventually—

Gordon: Yeah.

Morgan: Describe the tent city.

Gordon: Oh boy, that was something. That whole area along Highway 90, it stretched from—well, there was a K-Mart on the northeastern corner of the intersection of Highway 603 and 90. On the northwest corner was the motel that was owned by my friends. On the southwest corner was a Rite-Aid. And there were just some little businesses on the other corner. But I remember that week that I was sleeping outside there at the motel. Then after that, we went up to my friend Steve and Brenda’s house and they had an artesian well, so it was a trickle but it was an artesian well, so we knew it was safe, so we had water. At some point we went up to Picayune and found a pump, so after a week or so we had water that came out, more than a trickle. So things just, you know, slowly got better and better, but I was never in a real desperate situation like a lot of people were.
they left and took the lights with them. And that was about the time we started hearing these horror stories about what was going on in New Orleans and, of course, the stories turned out to be worse than what was really happening. And you know how rumors fly so, boy, that first night when those lights went and it was so pitch dark laying out in the asphalt—

**Morgan:** You changed your mind about the lights, didn’t you?

**Gordon:** (laughter) I wanted those lights back really badly.

**Morgan:** Were the helicopters evacuating injured people out or were they bringing supplies in?

**Gordon:** Both.

**Morgan:** OK.

**Gordon:** Yeah, it was just, it was very, very busy there for a while. So then the rest of that whole tent city complex was a little bit to the west and that’s where they had a Red Cross tent was set up, some big church group had tents set up. What else was down there? You know, eventually Wal-Mart had their tents, you know, after a while. But those tents were so important. I mean, you could get all that fresh water, food, hot cooked food or—oh, I’ll never forget the first time I had a salad after the storm, how incredibly good that salad was. And I’ll never forget the first time I had fried catfish after the storm; that was at a relief center, too. I had a little Coleman stove, but that’s all we had was the little two burner and, you know, it just—I mean, it was OK for making coffee in the morning, but that was about it. So I have some really, really great memories of that time after the storm. And I was into this routine. I mean, every morning I’d get up, make coffee for my friends, and then I’d head downtown because I wanted to do my standing in line at places as early as I could because it was so hot. Remember when we were breaking all those heat waves?

**Morgan:** I remember it.

**Gordon:** Oh, the heat was just awful and the smells were so bad, the smells down there.

**Morgan:** The day after the storm it was so fabulous.

**Gordon:** What?

**Morgan:** Do you remember? Do you remember that the day after the storm—

**Gordon:** Oh.

**Morgan:** —at least in Jackson, the weather was just so—
Gordon: Gorgeous.

Morgan: —crisp and kind of cool.

Gordon: Yeah.

Morgan: The next day hell broke open and I think it was ninety-five, ninety-five degrees again.

Gordon: Yeah, that’s right. That’s right. And I remember another thing about the nights without any lights down here, the stars, oh, were so beautiful at night. I remember that really, really well; after the morgue left, it was. (laughter) Yeah, it was so tough. But I had this routine. So I’d make the coffee and then I’d go and get my breakfast, a nice hot breakfast at the relief center tents that was there by the Sav-a-Center, then I’d go stand in line. And I—it was very comforting to have this kind of routine. And then Rita came, and when Rita came, you know, it was like all of a sudden half of these people, you know, they folded up their tents, a lot of them left, and most of them came back, but for a while there it was so tough after Rita because I’d had this routine, I had this—there was some order in the middle of all this chaos and, you know, it was just, boom, it was gone like that and I had to start again trying to make some kind of order. But you want to know my worst day after the storm? This place where I was staying and where my studio is off 603, it’s on the Deep Water Bayou, and the day before Rita was supposed to hit, we had decided, “OK,” you know, “we will decide on this day what we’re going to do, how we’re going to handle it.” So that morning, the day before it hit, I was up, oh, about four or 4:30, which is my usual time to wake up, and I was outside and my friend Brenda woke up. And she was outside and we were talking, and all of a sudden she said, “What’s that shining over there in the field?” you know, and it was—the moonlight was hitting it and we couldn’t figure out what it was. And we looked and over in the field on the other side of the property there was something shining, and all of a sudden it hit us at the same time, it was water. The sun came up and we were almost completely surrounded by water. It had just come up a whole day sooner than we thought it would. They had their RV, by that time, that they had purchased. I had the little camper. My husband was in Minnesota. The driveway was completely underwater and it was the most horrible feeling like, “My God, it’s happening again. We’re going to lose everything that we saved or that we bought to make ourselves comfortable since Katrina.” And my friends walked around the property, and the water wasn’t real deep at that point, but it was coming, you know, it was maybe only knee deep, but it was coming up fast. And they finally found one high point across the field where it was just a few inches deep. There were two fences there and my friend Steve got on his tractor and pulled out two fences, and we got in their pickup truck, which was high enough, and we got out. So we were able to evacuate. That was rough. Rita was a real rough day.

Morgan: Well, what about day-to-day life now?
Gordon: Well—

Morgan: Are you into any kind of routine?

Gordon: Oh yeah, I’m just, I’m working like fourteen and fifteen hour days, and I think it’s a very good thing, because I think if I had time to slow down a little bit, I think I would probably kind of lose it, emotionally. And I think—I’m so grateful that my life is so busy right now and it’s, between creating the work, marketing it, working at the gallery—it’s a co-op so I work there two days a week—I’m very, very busy. So my days are crazy; I’m dropping the ball all over the place. That’s why I told you you had to call yesterday, and I was right, it had completely left my mind. And it’s very good, it’s very good that I’m so busy right now. This feeling of being in limbo is the hardest thing, not being able to decide. And we’re very grateful to have the FEMA trailer and have this little camper, but it’s not the best way to live, so I’d like to be able to move on. So, I don’t know, it’s just life. It’s life post-Katrina, (laughter) I guess.

(end of interview)