

Letcher County
Jeff Chapman-Crane- Interview
Transcribed by Megan Arnold

Gritton: This is Joy Gritton and it is January 6th 2011, and I am interviewing Jeff Chapman-Crane here in Eolia and we are going to be talking about Jeff's life and work and I think I would like to start by just having you tell me a little bit about yourself where you grew up, and what that place was like, and how it shaped who you are today.

Chapman-Crane: I grew up in a rural area in east Tennessee around King's Port. We lived out in the country next to a farm. I had two older sisters and a younger sister and there were a few, a couple of neighborhood kids but you know, not very many. So we spent a lot of time entertaining ourselves and you know, out in the woods and fields. Especially, you know I spent a lot of time on my own just, roaming through the woods and fields, and I think that that really shaped me a lot. Developed a real appreciation for nature and the beauty, and I think I learned a lot by observing nature. So that really shaped a lot of who I am.

I've always, I've always drawn. My mother has drawings I did before I can even remember doing them, so art has always been a part of who I am. I've never actually remember wondering what I was going to do with my life, you know. I've always been an artist; I always knew that's what I was going to do. Kind of rare I guess, for somebody so young to feel that way, but I really don't even remember considering that question.

(Sound)

Gritton: What, what media did you start out with?

Chapman-Crane: Well, my only formal training was four years of high school art, and we experimented with different things; a lot of the early portraits I did were in pastel. And I, I did a lot of pastel work early on, especially the portraits. When I began to embark on a career as an artist I first turned to watercolor, and did a little bit of acrylic early on, but I never did really take to acrylic very well. I didn't like the way it felt, I didn't like the finish of it.

So I began to use casein, which is a water based medium that uses milk solids as one of the ingredients. And it doesn't have to be framed under glass, so it was what I used instead of oil; I never really took to oil painting very well either. So, the early paintings were mostly either watercolor or, or egg tempera- I mean casein. And then at some point I started using gouache, which is an opaque watercolor. And then somewhere along the line I developed an allergy to the casein, and so I switched over to egg-tempera, and I really like the egg-tempera a lot.

I'd actually kind of avoided egg-tempera because, my work was compared a lot to Andrew Wyeth and I didn't want one more reason to be compared to him. I mean I really admire his work and he has influenced me, but, you know, you want to have your own style, and be recognized for your own work, and so I didn't want one more reason to be compared to Wyeth.

But once I started egg-tempera, I just really fell in love with the medium. I liked it better than the casein; it just has more depth, it's just a nicer finish, and so, I've done a lot of egg-tempera since then. I guess it's been probably, I don't know, fifteen years maybe, since I first started using it.

Gritton: Usually people think of egg-tempera as being a difficult medium to work with and mix.

Chapman-Crane: Yeah, it's tricky, but it's like any other medium, it has its own unique characteristics and you have to make some adjustments to learn it. I think a lot of people, when they think of egg-tempera they think of the way it used to be used, which was to mix the egg yolk and the dry pigment in water, in small amounts at a time, and a very meticulous approach to, you do a lot of cross hatching and really fine work, and it is very labor intensive and time consuming. And that's, that's-- for one thing, you do not have to mix your own colors anymore. There are several companies that produce egg-tempera premixed in tubes; it is like you would buy oil or anything else. And by that time, I had been working in water-based media long enough that I developed some techniques that carried

over to egg-tempera pretty easily. And it didn't involve a lot of you know meticulous cross-hatching sort of approach to painting. So, you know, I don't paint that way with egg-tempera. I am able to do the paintings in a relatively short amount of time.

I was telling Steven earlier, I finished-- I guess I've done five egg-tempera paintings in the last six weeks or something. A couple of them I had already started but wasn't very far along with them, but you know. A couple of portraits and three landscapes. The landscapes I still have, so we can look at those when we go over to the gallery. But, you know, I have developed some techniques that really make it pretty quick to work in egg-tempera.

Gritton: How do, how do you select subjects? I'm sure you have some that are on commission, but if you are left to your own devices to choose, what inspires you?

Chapman-Crane: That's a really good question; I have been asked that before. It's not something I can really put my finger on so much. I think the common thread in all my work is-- well I mean I paint realistically and a lot of portraits and rural subject matter for the most part, so they kind of have that in common. But I think the thread that kind of runs through everything is, is light, you. I think that's what catches my eye, initially. I learned somewhere along the line that I don't really notice detail; ordinarily just in everyday life, I don't see detail a lot. It's when I'm working on a painting that I can, that I really focus on detail.

But when something appeals to me, I see the overall thing kind of in a flash; in an instant I see the overall picture; that's what attracts me to it. It's only after; you know I take photographs and work from that. It's only after I've taken the photograph and worked on the painting that I really zero in on the detail, I don't notice it initially. It's not like I see this scene and I start noticing all the details of why I like a particular image, it just, the appeal is there all in one big picture, you know.

Gritton: Interesting.

Chapman-Crane: Light, shadow, or just whatever.

Gritton: Is there- you said that you had formal training in high school, anyone that in particular that was influential in your develop as an artist? Either in high school or later? Or earlier?

Chapman-Crane: Well I give my high school art teacher a great deal of credit, he was really an exceptional teacher, Don Hilton was his name. He's still living and we still visit with him when we go back to King's Port to visit my family, he still lives in that area. A lot of the times I will still take paintings to him that I have done or I'm working on and we will talk about them. So there's still that relationship, you know. And I really, you know, can't say too much about him and his influence on me.

As far as other artists, of course, Rembrandt and the masters certainly have influenced my work. But I think more than any of the other old masters, I think Vermeer; because of the way he used light. He was probably the one who has influenced me the most. And then of course, more recent artists would be Andrew Wyeth and some of the American realists. Actually though, Van Gogh is my favorite artist of all time, although my style is not anything like his. I think it was his passion and his-- the emotional intensity of his work that draws me to him.

Gritton: You are not only an artist, but also, I would say a community activist, a community developer, if you will. Can you talk a little bit about what pulled you into those activities or how that evolved in your life?

Chapman-Crane: Well, a lot of it was-- had to do with the time period I grew up in. I was born in 1953, so when the 60's began, in 1960 I turned seven, by the time the 60's were over I was seventeen. So during that whole tumultuous decade of the civil rights movement, and the Vietnam War, and all of that kind of stuff going on; I spent the most, probably the most formative years of my life and it really had an effect on my social consciousness and my sense of justice.

I also grew up in the church, and at some point in my life, that became a much more important component; I became much more serious about my faith and certainly the theme

of justice runs all through, all the great spiritual traditions, not just Christianity and Judaism, but all of them really. And, you know, taking care of people who are less fortunate, and who are victims of exploitation and injustice. And that certainly had a formative effect on my life.

And it had a lot to do with, you know, why I came here actually to work on-- well to tell the story of Appalachia, but you know the story Appalachia has a lot to do with in justice, and exploitation, and people being abused, and misunderstood. And so, in telling my own story, it really has led to being an activist and working for justice, for the Appalachian people, and for people everywhere really. Because the story of what's happened in Appalachia's is true across the world, you know.

We've gotten to know a young man from Columbia, South America, really well, and Sharman [Chapman-Crane] probably talked about it too, there's some things going on in his community that are very similar to what's gone on here; the big corporations coming in and acquiring the resources and basically just exploiting people for, for the money that can be made from the coal or whatever the resource might be, whether it's, you know, gold or diamonds in South Africa, or plutonium or timber or oil or whatever it might be. So it's pretty much the same story anywhere you go.

Gritton: And you've at times, utilized your, your creative talents to educate people on some of those issues. I'm thinking in particular about a very special sculpture, could you talk a little bit about that?

Chapman-Crane: Yeah, the sculpture is called *The Agony of Gaia*. It was done as a statement about strip mining, or specifically about mountain top removal, which is the process of literally removing the top of the mountain to get to the coal seam. The sculpture depicts a woman, who represents Mother Earth. She's lying on her side, in sort of- in a fetal position, with her hands over her face, in an attitude of pain and also shame, you know. And her body is actually the mountain that's being strip-mined. The sculpture shows places where her body has been cut into and, you know, there's small-scale equipment, mining

equipment at work, you know, actually cutting away at her body to get to the coal. And it just—I wanted to do a piece that showed that the Earth was a living thing that felt what we were doing to her, and that its—that we are doing damage you know, damage to the very Earth that sustains us, you know, it's really kind of suicidal, what we're doing, to exploit the earth for financial gain and to power, you know, our-- all of the things we use, all the electricity that we use, especially in this country. And that there's a price, to pay for that. And I use it-- we do use it as an educational tool to inform people about this issue. It, it's mostly constructed of Styrofoam so it's lightweight, although it looks like it's, you know, real stone and Earth. It's actually quite lightweight. And it's matted on a table with folding legs, that have wheels, so it's very easy to move. There's a front panel and two side panels that fold up and there's a panel in back that's permanent. But anyway, it all folds up and locks together to form a crate. And there's a lid that then folds over and locks down and so the entire sculpture is self-contained and can be moved very easily and set up quickly. So, we've taken it all over the place; it's been to New York, it's been to Chicago a couple of times—or Chicago once I guess, and Washington D.C. a couple of times; we've had it at the state capitol in Frankfort during legislative sessions, and churches, and schools, and just anywhere we can set it up, and well you've had me bring it to Morehead to your classes and we've talked to students about it. So it's, it's something that I've, and I knew all along how I wanted to use it, that's why I designed it the way I did, to make it portable and easy to move and set up. Yeah, we've, we've reached a lot of people with it. It's been shown in probably over fifty venues now. Yeah, I finished it in 2004 so we've; we've had it on the road quite a bit. In fact it's just getting ready to go on tour for six months in south West Virginia, there's about six or eight different locations. Which it will be a first, I've never actually loaned it like that, for touring purposes. I'm a little nervous about that because I've always been the one that set it up and packed it up when it was time to move it, so I'm a little bit nervous about it. But it's, it was built to be durable, it has been stood on its side and laid on its back and every other way to transport it at times. So, it's held up pretty well.

Gritton: You had a, another body of work that has gone out in the world to educate, I think, about the people of Appalachia; it's the paintings that were used for the illustrations for *Rag Sale*?

Chapman-Crane: Mmm Hmm.

Gritton: Could you talk a little bit about how that came to be and...

Chapman-Crane: Well first of all, the title of the book *Rag Sale*, refers to, secondhand clothing stores and places that sell secondhand items and reduce price. The author of the book Artie Ann Bates grew up here in Letcher County and is a good friend of ours. And the story essentially is autobiographical, it's really a fictional story but it is really about her. And it involves the female members of the family; a couple of sisters and a cousin and a grandmother and mother that go one Saturday to these rag sales, and it essentially just follows them through the day, and looks at this whole event through the eyes of a child, and of course everything is an adventure to them, you know, trying on the women's clothes, digging through the barrels, and you know getting a grab bag at the end of the day and not knowing what's in it and being excited about going home and, you know, unwrapping everything, getting to read the little National Geographic's and the book section, and all this stuff.

So, you know, it's kind of a slice of life story but seen through the eyes of a girl who is about nine or ten. The way the illustrations came to be, Artie had written a story and sent it to Holton Mifflin, the company that ended up publishing it, and when it became clear that they were serious about the publishing it, she got a little bit nervous about who would illustrate it because she didn't want the illustrations to be, something that, I don't know, we have a big problem with the stereotypical image of the dumb hillbilly and backwards, barefoot, you know, image of Appalachian people. And she didn't want that, that sort of illustration, you know? About somebody who really didn't understand the culture and whose from somewhere else, so. She told them that she wanted it to be illustrated by somebody from the Mountain's, somebody who understood the culture, and that if they didn't agree to that

then she didn't want the book to be published, so she was pretty adamant about that. And they said well we agree, but we just don't know any Appalachian artists. Do you happen to know anybody? So she said, yeah, as a matter of fact I do. So, she called me and you know, told me about the project. So it kinda fell in my lap really.

So I ended up doing an illustration for one of the scenes, kind of as a job application, you know? I did this illustration and sent it to them to see what they thought. And they liked it. We didn't actually end up using that particular illustration, it was done in a little bit of a different style than, well different, not so much style, but, it was, just a little bit different format than what they decided on. So, they decided they did want me to do it, but in a little bit different way. So, you know, it's a project that lasted for about a year; a lot of work, you know, ended up taking, I work from photographs so I think I took something like three hundred and fifty pictures that were ultimately distilled down into like fifteen images for the book. You know, so, a lot of photographs that didn't get used. But it was a fun project, I enjoyed it, it's not something I think I would want to do a lot of because, because it was a lot of work and it didn't actually end up making a whole lot of money for, for us. But it was fun and I think it's a, a good book, and we're happy with it, so, I'm glad we did it.

Gritton: Do you see other of your, of your paintings, of your work, whether they're conscious intent or not, as dispelling some of the stereotypes of the region?

Chapman-Crane: Well that's one of the things I hope to accomplish from my work. It's one of the reason's I do what I do. You know, I grew up in Appalachia, in east Tennessee and like anybody growing up anywhere, you don't think about your own culture until you encounter it, encounter something different from that. For me that happened when I was about eleven or twelve years old; our church youth group had saved up money for about a year and took a trip to Canada. And along the way we had arranged to stay with some families at a couple of churches, and the way up we stayed with some families along the way up in Detroit and then we went into Canada and stayed a week and came back down through Niagara Falls area of New York state and spent the night with some families in the

church there. And several families would take two or three of us home with them and feed them supper and put them up for the night. And I remember the group we were staying, the family we were staying with, there was about three or four of us, were asking us questions about where we were from and all this stuff. And at one point, the woman said: Do, well now do the people from Tennessee ordinarily wear shoes? We thought she was just kinda kidding, you know, but it was obviously that was what she thought, that was her concept of people from Tennessee. It was a very embarrassing situation for us, you know? I was twelve, eleven or twelve years old, the others were about the same age and we didn't know what to say, we didn't know how to, how to react to that. And for a long time it, it, I was actually embarrassed for a while about where I was from because I realized that for the first time in my life that it, that's how people saw us. Even though I knew that's not how it was. And it took a while to get beyond that. It was actually through my art that I began to have a whole different image.

My high school art teacher that I mentioned earlier was also a native of east Tennessee. And he'd been around quite a bit, he'd been in the Navy and he'd traveled and he'd run into this same sort of negative stereotype; and he, he just never bought into it, you know, he would never let it bother him. He would often end his stories by saying that he might be a hillbilly, but he wasn't a dumb hillbilly. And it took me a while to realize that in addition to teaching us how to draw and paint, he was also telling us not to be ashamed of who we were just because of where we happen to be from or our culture was a little different or we spoke differently, you know.

So, that really kinda helped turn things around for me. So when I began to embark on my career as an artist, I started actually telling a story from my own perspective, you know. And that became even more focused, I think, when I came here, it became more intentional, you know, about telling the story of Appalachia through art and from the perspective of somebody who grew up here and loved the place, the land and the people and the culture. I mean there's, you know, there's problems, like there is with any, any culture, any place; you

know we can be a little clannish and, you know, but, you know, it's a great place to be and it's, it's, it bothers me a lot of what's going on with the mining, how much is being destroyed. You know, we do what we can to try and fight that but it's, it's a tough battle.

Gritton: What are, what are some of the other problems that you think are the most pressing or are the most devastating to the people of Appalachia right now?

Chapman-Crane: Well, was that a blast shot? Did you all hear that? Sometimes you can feel it; sometimes it will shake the house. But I guess where they are blasting right now so. Well, you know, poverty has been a problem in Appalachia for a long time. But I don't think, even though, you know, prior to the coal industry coming in here, people struggled to make a living, to make ends meet. But it was, I think different in those days, you know I've heard a lot of people say: We didn't know we were poor until somebody came and told, from somewhere else came here and told us we were. I mean it was a hard life, people had to struggle to get through, but there were some good things, you know, about the way of life in those days. I think since the industry, the coal industry has come here, the radical changes that took place in the culture since then where people became dependent on just one industry and its an astrictive industry that does a lot of damage to the environment. I think along the line, there's been this loss of self-esteem, you know, a real, a loss of identity in a lot of ways. And part of, you know, I've done a lot of reading and thinking about this, but part of the process of exploiting people is to dehumanize. You know, anywhere that there's exploitation going on there's a dehumanize, dehumanizing process that happens too. And people in Appalachia have experienced that. You know, they've, we've been told that we're backwards and ignorant and, you know, that we can't cope with the modern world and essentially that we're expendable, you know, for the benefit of the rest of the country, you know. And its land and the people who live here are just essentially expendable. And I think to get back to your question about the problems, I think one of our biggest, maybe our biggest problem is that we have somewhere along the line bought into that, we have started to believe that about ourselves, and that we're not worth much. And I think

when people feel that way then they're going to let things happen to them that shouldn't, that shouldn't happen. You know, we're going to let people take our land and destroy our water or you know. So I think self-image is a, is a big problem here.

Gritton: Do you have any thoughts on where we start to rebuild that sense of self-worth, that-- And through that, communities that have a sense of, you know, value, maybe one another and the land?

Chapman-Crane: Well, I have thought a lot about that too. You know when you think about, when you think about how a child, you know a new born infant, learns about the culture that they are born into, you know, they learn through stories, through music and song, through repetition of sounds, movement, and visual images; they learn through the arts, you know all of those are art forms . And so they, they learn about life and the culture they're brought up in through arts; they learn to perceive the world through the arts and how we perceive things determines what we believe and what we do, so I believe the arts are vital, a major thing socially. I think the arts have always been on the cutting edge of social movements. And if we're going to change the world we live in, we have to change the way people think about it and perceive it, the way we do that is through art, I think.

If we feel differently, if we perceive the world differently, we are going to act differently. If we see the land as just something that can be bull dozed and exploited, blown up for the coal or the gas or whatever, just to supply energy so that we can, you know, have all of these, all this electricity for things that we, are kinda questionable. You know, if that's how we see the land and the people then that's what we're going to do. But if we see it as something that's intrinsically valuable and vital to our long term survival then we're, that's gonna form how we act. That's what we deal with, that's what's going on.

So see there's that attitude, you know, that this place is just here to be exploited. And there's also the attitude that it's a precious gift and that we need to preserve it and take care of it and pass it on to future generations and people have to choose. I, I did a painting called *Legacies*, and it's a painting of a year girl, about eleven or twelve, and she's just

holding this leaf in her hand and just looking at it with wonder and awe and behind her is a, is a high wall from stripped mined and the title like I said is *Legacies*, plural. And the suggestion that there's these dual legacies here in the mountain. One is the attitude that the land is just there to be used and the other is, you know, that it's this thing that sustains us and gives us life and that we all have to choose which of those legacies we're going to accept.

So I think it's through art that, that we can hopefully change people's perceptions and ultimately change, change history, I mean it's what we're trying to do really.

Gritton: You know there's such a strong history in the region, of music in particular, being utilized to rally people, to encourage people, to give them hope when there doesn't seem to be hope and encourage them to decide which side--

Chapman-Crane: Which side are you on?

Gritton: Yeah, exactly. Do you have any thoughts on why [cough] why it's been music at the forefront of the social change and resistance and community organizing in the region as opposed to the visual arts?

Chapman-Crane: I, I don't have a real infinitive answer to that. I think that, I think because life was very difficult here, the visual art, and maybe it has to do too with the educational system kinda lagging behind, formal education. Music, I think, was an easier art form to transfer from one place to another, and transpose, and you know to bring a banjo or a guitar along in a move from one country to another, one region to another is maybe easier. There's, I think, more of a tradition of music in the mountains.

Visual art, I think, is a fairly recent development as far as, I mean there's also, there's always been, I think, a visual component to, to life here, I mean, people, you know, they incorporate an aesthetic beauty into practical items like quilts and baskets, and you know; porch posts, they carve, you know, do nice carvings or design work into, practical items. But as far as, visual art as a vocation, I think it's a very new thing in Appalachia.

I think, you know, storytelling of course has been, has been a long history in the mountains too, as an art form. But I think a lot of the artists who practice art, their art in Appalachia, for me at least and I think for, for Pam and a lot of the other artists that we know, that story telling component is sort of woven into their work; it's sort of a different way to tell a story. I don't know why though visual art took longer to take hold, I think it probably does have something to do with, with life being such a struggle here that, you know, there wasn't a lot of time to pursue that, and music was just an easier venue I guess for expression. And also because, you know, for the most part I think visual art maybe requires more formal instruction than some of the other art forms. Not always, but sometimes, I think a lot of times; it's a discipline that requires more intense study, a lot of the times.

Gritton: Did anyone in your family do any of the visual arts?

Chapman-Crane: No

Gritton: Traditional or other

Chapman-Crane: No, no, it's something that started with me. I'm not sure that that's ever an inherited thing either. I mean I think it could be, if you grow up in the environment where that's done a lot maybe it's easier to take that up, but I'm not sure it's something that's inherited. You look at famous artists in history, there's a few instances of offspring following in the footsteps of ancestors but, it's not always like that. I don't think the offspring necessarily do work as good as their predecessors did.

Gritton: So, when you, when you, after you left high school, what path did you take to, did you immediately begin doing your own work and how did, how did you find your path to here?

Chapman-Crane: Pretty much, yeah. Immediately after high school I worked, I was offered a job in a frame shop for a while, and that was really helpful, to learn just how to do all that. But even at that time I was still doing a lot of my own work. Kind of trying to find my own voice and experience different media, and see which ones I liked, and which ones I didn't. It's a slow evolution I think, I mean I never really experimented with different styles so

much, I always preferred realism, it's just the way I felt about doing things that way. But like I said, I think my voice or the, what I wanted to say with my work, I think, became much more intentional after I moved to Kentucky. I guess one of the things, the move to Kentucky helped me realize was that, my own personal story, my parent's story and mine, was much more, was shared by a lot of other people in Appalachia. My parents had moved away from here and lived in Cincinnati for a while to find work. My oldest sister was born in Cincinnati. I always knew that that was my own family's story but it was really only after I came here that I began to learn that it was really most people's story; you know, a lot of people had left during my parent's generation to find work, but were so rooted here that they came back as soon as they could, if not always to live but at least, you know, we'd come home on the weekends to spend a few hours here, so.

When I began to realize that it was the story of so many people of Appalachia, I guess it sort of sharpened the focus of my own work. So, I think, you know, moving to eastern Kentucky - part of the reason I moved here was because the place where I grew up, was to me, starting to lose a lot of its Appalachian feel. _____(??), Eastman Kodak, Mead Paper, a lot of big companies and most of the executives from those companies were from someplace else, and it just felt, to me, like the culture had changed somewhat. I guess I knew some people who were living in Letcher County at that time, and to me, it just, the culture of Appalachia, the real Appalachian culture seemed more visible or less eluted, I guess, here. So that had a lot to do with why I chose to come to eastern Kentucky.

Gritton: Presence

Chapman-Crane: Mmm Hmm

Gritton: Any, any closing thoughts that you would offer to young people who are wanting to build their communities, and rebuild their communities, in particular to use the arts, to do that?

Chapman-Crane: Yeah, I know that young people in this area are gonna hear that if you're gonna make anything of yourself you got to leave, you got to get out, you know, there's

nothing for you here. And it's true that it's a hard place to be, there's high unemployment, there's not many jobs, and it's a tough place to be. And I would say that getting out of here for a while is probably a good thing, you know, to see something else and maybe take advantage of educational opportunities and places. But I would-- we always tell young people that, you know, they don't have to leave here that they can come back; I mean even if they leave to get an education, they can come back here and make a difference. I mean, you know, one of the great losses of experiences is so many best and brightest have left and not come back and they're contributing to society- other places and helping their communities wherever they are but we need that here, we need, we need young people to come back here and try to make a difference here. I think, you know, they need to realize that it may mean some sacrifices, you know, they're probably not going to have the, maybe the good paying jobs that they might find somewhere else. But there's—in the long run that doesn't mean very much at all. There's an awful lot of good things here despite the problems. And that there's always going to have changes, if people care enough about it to stay and work at making those changes. So that's what we try to tell young people from this area. And that they can pursue their dreams. It's not always an easy road to take, but, there's—it's worthwhile. So, that's what I would tell kids who, who are in college and looking at their future. They can choose their own course.

Gritton: Well thank you for sharing your, your history and--