Betty Brownlee Oral History

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Abstract: Betty Brownlee was an art student at Wayne State University in the 1970s. She lived in the Cass Corridor and participated in community and campus events. She moved back to the neighborhood in 2003 and bought a house in 2005. She talks about the changes in the neighborhood over time and the recent switch to the Midtown identity as well as artists in the Cass Corridor/Midtown area. The collection consists of and audio recording and a transcript

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History: As a student at Wayne State in the 1970s, Betty Brownlee lived in the Cass Corridor and interacted with several prominent artists in the Detroit area. In 2003, she moved back and continued to paint while she watched the neighborhood change and develop as new businesses arrive and the increased rent pushes out longtime residents to make way for new.

Scope and Content:
The interview consists of one audio recording and one 14 page transcript. The interview was conducted by Julia Westblade as part of the LIS 7770 Oral History class on November 13, 2015.

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Julia Westblade: Today is Friday November 13. It's about 9:25 in the morning. I am here with Betty Brownlee. She's an artist in the area and I will be asking her about her time as a long term resident in the Cass Corridor. First, I guess, how did you come to live in Detroit and the Cass Corridor?

Betty Brownlee: Well, I was a student at Wayne State in 1971 but it was a cool place to hang out before then so I was already familiar with the area when I became a student. It was just a cool place to go. The museum, the DIA [Detroit Institute of Arts] was open and people would hang out there. There was a restaurant called Johnny's Restaurant or Johnny's Café which is now I think Olympus or one of those. Anyway it's Warren at Cass so people would hang out there, too.

JW: So did you grow up near here, then?

BB: I grew up in Illinois til I was 12 and then we moved here when I was 12 and I went to school in Garden City.

JW: Okay. And so what do you consider to be the Cass Corridor?

BB: I consider, well the old Cass Corridor sort of extended down Cass Avenue past University maybe a few blocks and west towards the Lodge Freeway and probably north, or south, that direction. South. Maybe that's where I consider the Cass Corridor primarily down towards Martin Luther King and even further down toward Temple where the Masonic Temple is. All of that back in the 70s was considered Cass Corridor. It got a little safer as you moved towards Wayne State and then the campus has always been safe because of the Wayne State police, I guess. But it got pretty dangerous the further away you went from campus.

JW: Okay. What were your impressions of the Cass Corridor when you first lived here?

BB: I thought it was a lot of fun. I was, you had to keep an eye out you know in your surroundings cause it was significantly, it was dangerous as you got further away from campus but there were a lot of clubs down there. There was Cobb's Corner which is now Spiral Collective on the corner of Cass and Willis. And so that was a place that we would hang out and then further down was the Gold Dollar and that was where the White Stripes used to play there before they became famous. That was really rough down that way. There was mostly things on Cass Avenue. Alvin's was down this way. It was a popular hangout. Sundays especially Sunday brunch but also at night they had music. Lot of music.

JW: What kind of community existed in the area?

BB: It was a really – There was a strong sense of community I would say. There wass a lot of political activity. I remember going to a lot of anti-war demonstrations. This is all in the early 70s and so there was that sense of community that way. It wasn't like today where could just text somebody. You'd have to, we did have telephones. You'd have to call or some people didn't have phones so you'd go knock on their door and then fliers, posters glued to walls stuff like that would inform people of where the the next demonstration was going to be or march. There were marches that would go down Woodward. Peace rallies, anti-war rallies, race rallies

cause it was right after most of the rioting, I don't know how else to put it. I know there's a correct term for it but that racial disruption happened in the late 60s so there was a lot of residue from that left over and there was a lot of racial tension kind of like what you see now in Missouri. What's going on in Missouri right now is a lot like what it was in the early 70s here I would say.

JW: Was the community at Wayne State separate from the residents in Cass Corridor or was it all pretty much –

BB: It was all pretty much the same. There was a lot – there were more students who drove in but there were many students who lived around the apartments just like now. Pretty much the same. This area itself hasn't changed much once you, I would say hit Canfield with all the stores and stuff now, that's where all the commercial spaces has really changed the neighborhood recently. But before there were students. I lived on Hancock in a couple of different buildings and we would just walk to school and there were a lot of students like that but mostly it was students coming in from the suburbs.

JW: So was the community involved in the demonstrations and stuff that you talked about?

BB: Oh yeah. Wayne State was totally – a lot of the marches would start at Wayne State and go downtown down by – all the way down to Jefferson and rally there. What's now that - not Ford Field. Do you know the name of that? Do you know where the Fist is?

JW: Oh yeah.

BB: And there's that park right on the river across from that.

JW: I know what you're talking about but I can't think of the name right now.

BB: Yeah, it's where the jazz fest is and stuff. So the marches would go all the way down there. It's about a two mile walk.

JW: Okay. Why did you leave the Cass Corridor?

BB: I just like to move around a lot. While I was living in the Corridor I would move I would say a year in one place and then move somewhere else just because I like to move. And I lived in other places around the city. Then I was married. We got married in 1983 and we moved to Lansing as a family for about twelve years and then I moved back. And I also went to – so I moved back in 2002. --13. I mean, sorry. 2003. So I moved back because I was feeling nostalgic about Detroit and I always liked this neighborhood so I moved back and bought a house here.

JW: So then when you lived in Lansing, when you told people that you had lived in the Cass Corridor, what was their reaction?

BB: They thought I was pretty tough, you know, cause it had a reputation of being tough, urban city which it was so like any time I would be traveling and I felt a little uneasy, if I felt like I was

in danger, I would just say something like, "yeah, well, I'm from Detroit," and people would just back off. The guys would leave me alone and stuff when you said you're from Detroit because they probably thought you had a gun or I don't know. It had that reputation as it was murder capital for at least a couple of years. So it had this really rough kind of reputation.

JW: So that was the whole city and not just this area that you would tell people that?

BB: Yeah, I would say I was from Detroit. I wouldn't say I was from the Cass Corridor because they wouldn't know what that was outside of Detroit. And I went to Wayne State in grad school, too, in the art department from 92 to 95 so I would drive from Lansing here and then commute.

JW: You talked about this that you came back in 2003. Just because you missed the area?

BB: Yeah my kids had graduated from high school and then they were going to college and I had already been divorced. I had been divorced about 10 years so I was free to go wherever I wanted so initially I rented studio space in Eastern Market for two years to see whether I wanted to stay in Detroit and I did want to stay in Detroit so then I bought the house over on Calumet.

JW: What changes were the most encouraging to see?

BB: Encouraging?

JW: Yeah.

BB: Okay, encouraging. The safety I think has improved but the campus itself and the surrounding area where there's been Wayne State police I feel as though I've always felt safe on campus or in the surrounding area that they cover so I don't think that has changed much if at all. But the city itself or the outlying areas of the Cass Corridor when you start going past MLK and Temp and that area, I see the safety kind of creeping out that way. I feel more comfortable now walking down Alexandrine than I did five years ago. I think that would be the encouraging part.

JW: Yeah. Was there anything that you were excited to see? Maybe like but was there something that you came back and thought, "this is great"?

BB: Oh, when I moved back?

JW: Yeah

BB: It still pretty much had the same feel to it. Yeah, it felt pretty much the same when I first moved back. Right now I think it's safer but when I first moved back in two thousand – when I bought the house in 2005, the first week I was there I got broken into four times.

JW: Wow.

BB: So I'm thinking, "Oh, what did I get myself into? Why did I buy this house?" But the police were all over it. They staked out my house from across the street. I got a dog and then all of that

stopped. But it lasted for a week of constantly getting a phone call. "You have to come home. Your house, you know, someone's broken into your house." I got a call from the police commissioner who said, "Your name keeps coming across my desk here." It was reassuring and just more of an annoyance, I guess, cause I was pretty used to, it wasn't the first set of times I'd had my house broken into. So it was just really annoying and they had stole a few things but nothing of any value.

JW: What do you think still needs to happen or were there changes that you weren't happy to see?

BB: From when I moved back –

JW: yeah

BB: -Or now?

JW: Either.

BB: Now I find it a little annoying to be living here with things like Shinola, it's just a little. Say Shinola, for example, is one of the first businesses that moved it and I feel is a bit exploitative of the neighborhood with the gentrification here in what's now called Midtown. It disrupts the pattern of the neighborhood in a way that it forces people out. I noticed there's a sign right next to Avalon Bakery over there, one of the businesses there has a For Rent sign up now so I immediately thought that they're being squeezed out by the rents are probably going up and they're being squeezed out. So it happens not only with the business sector but also with the residents. People are saying, I'm saying it's safer to go over to Alexandrine now than it used to be and I think that's because a lot of the the neighborhood is changing where it's forcing out residents who have been living here for a long time. Forcing them to find other places to move as the rent increases. So I feel fortunate that I bought my house and so I won't have that happen unless my property taxes may go up and that may force me out. So, you know, gentrification everywhere, the bad part about it. I don't feel like I have to look over my shoulder as I'm walking down the street but is that a good trade off to kind of see it become less diverse. Becoming more like Ann Arbor. So that's what I say. So Shinola, they move in and they bring their business to Detroit, which, okay that's great but then to give back to the community, they open a dog park, right? Which is like, okay, that's nice but - and I do use it. My dog loves the dog park but the people who live next to the dog park, I have a friend who lived in that building, he works at the Detroit film theatre and he's lived there for like 30 years or something and has been a fixture in the neighborhood, he had to move because the dogs were barking and it was disruptive. So, I'm all for change, but I have a friend who moved from Brooklyn, New York here and when I first met her, I was really combative with her, like, why are you moving here? And she was saying, "Well, things are going to change in Detroit. Would you rather see it change this way or would you rather see it become super corporate?" Do you know what I mean? So I suppose, it's not horrible, the changes, but it could be worse. It's just a little disruptive and kind of annoying.

JW: What do you think created the change in the neighborhood? You talked about Shinola moving in but were there other things that you think helped create this change?

BB: Well, I think Detroit has always had super low rent, right, because people haven't had money to pay anything more. So with the low rent it attracts artists, musicians, you know, more of the creative people because they normally don't have a lot of money. So you have all that going on. You have this creative hub going on so then the real estate follows that. It's kind of a SoHo effect where SoHo in New York used to be really shabby and not shabby chic but just shabby so the artists were living here and then the real estate follows the artist, right, and then the artists get kicked out. The last I heard they were in Chelsea and then they've gotten kicked out of – rents have gone up in Chelsea. So the same thing's happening here where because the rent is so cheap, some company like Shinola can come in and buy a building for super cheap and set up shop and have cheap labor around. I don't know how much they pay to be fair but they can move in because the property value is so low, create a hype and the buzz and then that attracts more of that kind of business. So I think initially it's the cheap rent and then as that was happening suburban people I would talk to, "Oh, I'm afraid to go to Detroit" and all of a sudden I'm seeing suburbanites with expensive shoes on at the dog park. I'm like, "ehhh." The dog park has Astroturf. It gets kind of nasty. So then I see suburbanites going to the dog park and it's like, I guess they're not afraid to come to the neighborhood anymore. So now my painting studio is in Highland Park and I can tell, I'm foreshadowing or forecasting that Highland Park will be the next Midtown because you're going to have the M1 rail go right down Woodward, there's people from New York buying up property in Highland Park and turning that into studio space. So that's my prediction is that Highland Park will be the next Midtown.

JW: And when you say "Midtown," do you mean something separate from Cass Corridor?

BB: Yeah, how I see the Cass Corridor and Midtown, I see it as one and the same. Or that Midtown used to be the Cass Corridor and Cass Corridor is now Midtown. It has kind of the same the same boundaries, right, as far as I know.

JW: So do you think that means that Cass Corridor is kind of disappearing and Midtown is taking over or do you think they can live synonymously?

BB: I think that Cass Corridor is pretty much past. And the term Cass Corridor always had this dangerous, sort of scary – when I lived here in the 70s there were prostitutes walking up and down the street outside of campus. It was a little scarier to go out especially at night. We would drive everywhere. You had to have a car down here. You couldn't walk like you'd walk now. It's become more walkable. But you would never, you'd walk to school but you would never walk to a club or even if it were a block away, you would drive your car and get as close as you could to your location because you didn't want to be out walking around because it was too dangerous. So that was the connotation of the Cass Corridor was that it was this dangerous, scary place and so to change that feel of the Cass of that name, of that brand of Midtown, Cass Corridor was given the name Midtown. That's how I understand it. So now, I used to live in the Cass Corridor, I'm in the same house, but now I live in Midtown. And it has kind of the same boundaries. Maybe it goes up to Woodward now, I'm sure it does. Woodward and maybe I think that might be the eastern boundary, I'm not quite shure. So it may extend out a little but

further. Technically I know that Woodbridge is not part of Midtown so it's basically the same boundaries but it just has been rebranded as Midtown instead of the Cass Corridor.

JW: And when did that change happen? When did you start hearing that switch?

BB: I would say it was after I moved here so between maybe five, six years ago I started hearing it more and more. It's been gradual. And we used to mock the name Midtown, like, "Ugh, ha ha ha 'Midtown.' Whatever." But now, I'm even using it. It sort of gradually crept into the vocabulary.

JW: When you say you've been using it, do you start telling people you identify as someone from Midtown or do you still identify as a Cass Corridor resident?

BB: When people ask me where I live, I tell them I live near Wayne State. Cause that's more, that's avoiding the whole thing. Cause I don't want to say Cass Corridor because that sounds like, I don't know, it sounds pretentious in a way or dating myself, maybe, and Midtown is still, I mean, I use it but it's like, ugh, I don't want to. I cringe a little bit when I use it so I just say I live near Wayne State to avoid the whole thing.

JW: Yeah, that works. What are the greatest needs in the community now?

BB: I don't know. We have pretty much everything now. We have a grocery store. We have Whole Foods. At first I balked at that, too, and thought, Oh, Whole Foods, but Whole Foods over in the neighborhood, they're subsidized by the state so the prices are pretty reasonable and they do have fresh produce at a reasonable price so I do shop there. So we have the grocery store that we needed for a long time. We don't need the new leather store that could have been another market or something. There's a new leather store called Wills [Will Leather Goods] that, come on, with expensive leather goods. I think that's how they're branding themselves. I think they use the word expensive. So, what do we need? We have plenty of restaurants. It's pretty safe right now. We have a dog park. The sense of community is kind of not so much there anymore so I could say more of that. Maybe more diversity. Bring the diversity back and I have housing across from my house there's subsidized housing so that's primarily Black – in fact it's all Black so I appreciate that. There's a few places like that. They've been there since the 70s so when those townhouses were built in the 70s and that's always been subsidized so I would like to see more of that in the neighborhood to keep the diversity so it doesn't completely turn into Ann Arbor.

JW: mm-hmm

BB: Nothing wrong with Ann Arbor –

JW: yeah

BB: But, you know. This is Detroit so I don't want Detroit to change so much that it loses its identity. It's going to lose it to some extent I'm sure, but I don't know.

JW: Yeah. What were the greatest needs in the community when you lived here before or even when you moved back?

BB: A grocery store was the main, I think was the main thing because it was always in my immediate neighborhood it was safe. Or I felt safe, but to go grocery shopping, you would have to go to the suburbs to go grocery shopping. And so having Whole Foods move in I would say really helped the neighborhood a lot.

JW: Where did you used to go? Which suburb would you go to to buy groceries?

BB: Well, I used to paint houses so wherever my clients were there would always be a Meijers or a Krogers or something like that. Usually it would be where, depending on where I was working, and then I could stop there on my way home and pick up groceries. If I weren't out in the suburbs, then I would stop at, well the Meijers at 8 Mile wasn't open yet so I'd have to go to the Meijers, there was a Meijers out in Inkster maybe or Livonia out on Middlebelt Road or there's a Meijers in Roseville. I mean, I had to travel to go to a big grocery store to buy all the stuff that you need.

JW: yeah

BB: But there was no place, every once in a while there would be a Mom and Pop kind of shop that would open up and it wouldn't last very long. It would have, there was one on Woodward. They might have lasted a year or two and then they closed down and they sold fresh produce and sandwiches and stuff. You know, they'd make sandwiches from the produce kind of like Goodwells [Goodwells Natural Food Market]. Goodwells really helped out before Whole Foods moved in. And of course there's always Eastern Market. You could go there on Saturdays but you couldn't buy paper, you know toilet paper or stuff. And there was another place on Woodward that got shut out by Whole Foods, I think, Ye Olde Butcher Market, that had fresh produce and a full grocery line so when they opened up I would go there. And then Whole Foods opened up shortly after that and then there went Ye Olde Butcher Shop which was single store owned by one guy and then that went under because of Whole Foods. So it's kind of like a symbol or a metaphor or something of what's happening to the whole neighborhood. And now I shop at Whole Foods so it's a big corporation or real estate can come in and take advantage of the low rent and the amount of people that are here and kind of capitalize on that.

JW: Do you think that there have been more changes between when you moved back and now or in that time that you were gone?

BB: Oh, when I, yeah, when I moved back. I think more changes happened here in the last three years than anything I've seen before. It was coming back, I bought the house in 2005 and it was getting better and better and you'd start hearing about Midtown and then there was that real estate where everything kind of fell. That recession in 2008, I think it was--

JW: yeah

BB: --yeah, and so Midtown, er, ha Midtown was coming around and the townhouses on Third were being built over by Canfield and they were pretty nice-looking. So you'd see little bits and pieces here that it was making, that it was going to come back. And then in 2008 the recession hit and then it all went downhill, so in the last three years, I'd say, I'm seeing huge changes. With things being build and businesses coming in and Oh, another restaurant with lines out the door. It's, I don't know. And the museum. The museum has changed a lot. The Detroit Institute of Arts has changed a lot. It used to be real low key meant for everyone of course was welcome. It was free admittance. It was always free and you could put in a donation if you wanted to when you walked in but there was never any, it was always free. And they'd have these huge exhibits of Monet. A Monet exhibit blockbuster kind of thing but otherwise it was just very low key. The neighborhood people would go in and hang out there, too, back in the 70s. And now they're pushing more and more to get more and more people to come in and attendance and working the millage. So that has changed, too. I wouldn't go there just to hang out anymore. It's too, I don't know, even that has become a little bit commercialized, I guess. Trying to make art understandable for everyone because they don't get that in the schools anymore too much. So reaching out to everyone, it's almost like dumbing it down for the public but I think in some regard, that's even more denigrating than just having it open and come in and look at the art. Now it's come in and we're going to interpret the art for you and put a big sign up next to the Van Gogh to tell you what this painting is about rather than just letting people come in and look at the paintings and figure it out for themselves. So in a way, the trying to reach out to the public is more snobby than just letting people come in if they want to rather than trying to reach out so much and pull people in. You must come in. I don't know.

JW: Do you think that the closeness of the DIA, do you think that that influenced the art community that was here?

BB: I think it used to and it was more the community influencing the museum. Like, in the 80s, there was a group, if you go to the Tribes of the Cass Corridor, there's a website that has a lot of history of the Cass Corridor, there was a guy named Stephen Goodfellow who spearheaded this push to get the museum to show Michigan artists or Detroit artists because there were a lot of Detroit artists back then. Good artists. And so there was a push towards, it was more when people would gather together or get together and try to influence change by numbers like the demonstrations or the marches. It was the same kind of mentality where a group of artists that would get together and sign petitions and gather at the DIA demanding that they show Detroit artists and not to be a mausoleum. To be a museum instead of a mausoleum where they showed all dead people.

JW: yeah

BB: So it was more the community attacking the museum. Now it's the other way around; the museum is trying to attract the community. So there was a program called OMAP: Ongoing Michigan Artist Program and it was a gallery where the gift shop is now, I'm pretty sure that's where it was, and they would show Michigan artists. And that lasted, I don't know how long that lasted. Maybe ten years?

JW: But that's not there anymore?

BB: No. No. And now do you see the community, "hey, show some Detroit –" Although I do see there are more Detroit artists mingled through the museum so that's probably how it shifted.

JW: Mmkay.

BB: Mmkay.

JW: And so, we've mentioned that there were a lot of artists in this area and the DIA. Who were some of the artists that first first inspired you when you moved to the area?

BB: Yeah, some of the good artists I thought that were going on, there were, it was mostly a male dominated, definitely male dominated. You can go back to the records and look at the shows that were going on at the different galleries and it would be all guys. Guys guys guys guys. They wouldn't even have a token woman in many of the shows. There were important women that often get overlooked when you're looking back onto the history of the Cass Corridor art. And so the women that were important: Nancy Mitchnick was very important. She inspired me in my painting classes. She had already moved to California to teach at U, I think it was USC and she ended up teaching at Harvard and now she's back in Detroit. For the cheap rent. So Nancy Mitchnick was a big inspiration as a student and so was Ellen Phelan who is now in New York City married to Joel Shapiro who is a, he's more famous than she because he's a guy, I suppose. There's an opening tonight at Center for Creative Studies for Brenda Goodman and she's another female artist who left Detroit probably because, oh I don't know why, I would image it was because it was so, but it was like that everywhere I would have to say. In New York, too, it was all very male dominated. Very macho. But Brenda Goodman left also but she's having a show tonight at CCS. If you're around you should check it out –

JW: Oh, yeah.

BB: - there will be a lot of people there. So those were the woman that would have influenced me. Mostly Nancy Mitchnick and Ellen Phelan. Some of the guys I hung out with. I lived with Gordy [Gordon] Newton for several years. His work is at the museum now. He was pretty big at the time. And Bob Sestok who still lives in the neighborhood over a block from me and he's still very active in the community. There's a sculpture park that he developed on the Lodge Freeway over by Alexandrine and the Lodge. Trying to think who else did I like? Jim Chatlain, Bradley Jones. These were all people a little bit older than me. And then my friends that I was hanging out with, Trisha Soderberg is still actively painting. Ruth Goldfadan is teaching art in Detroit Public Schools. Lyla Kadaj is also teaching in public schools and still painting. She has a show up right now in Hamtramck. But those are the people I hung out with. My little circle.

JW: What do you think it was about this community, and maybe it was the rent that you've mentioned before, but what do you think drew artists to this community?

BB: yeah, I would say the rent and the comradery. Cause there were other artists here so you'd hang out with people that you could talk to, like Oh, do you know?. You could talk about different artists that no one else would know. You know, or art school here. It's that building,

right? The art building, yeah, I used to take design classes up in this building and it would get so hot up there in the summer. It still does, evidently, they don't have the air conditioning up there. But the art, Wayne State had a big influence on the art community. The art school was huge back then. It was really big. Now it's probably about half the size. It's still big and it has a national reputation as being a traditional art school just like most of Wayne State's programs are traditional. Your library science is traditional, right?

JW: Mmhmm

BB: You have books.

JW: Yeah.

BB: So Wayne State had a big influence on the community and I think that the art students were interested in living in the neighborhood and so it kind of fed off each other. Like, I started off as a foreign language major and ended up taking a art class as an elective and got kind of pulled into the art department that way. Cause there was just something, the energy and the creative stuff that was going on, it was just too much of a draw to not get sucked into it for me.

JW: And what does the community have to offer artists now as opposed to back then when you said that the art department's about half of what it was?

BB: Yeah, I think that in the 80s there was a big shift from the creative element in society more towards making money. That was kind of the shift so people were starting to, "Oh, I don't know if I want to go to art school. I won't be able to make any money. I guess I'll go to business school cause I'll make money." So I think that was kind of a shift. And it was before graphic design was a really viable way to do much because the computers weren't really that useful then. So I think there was a shift away more towards from the, you know, the poetry, there were a lot of poets around here too then, and writers, musicians, of course we'd just come out of the Motown era. There are still plenty of musicians around but I think that's pretty much what it was. Students wanted to have, to make a living after they were finished with school.

JW: Yeah;

BB: And I waited tables for ten years after during school and after school until I got married. Then when I got divorced, I had my BFA from Wayne. Bachelor of Fine Arts and so when I got divorced, I waited tables again and then I came back and got my MFA so that, then now I'm teaching as an adjunct which that will never change because I started, not only is it more difficult to get a full time position right now, I waited way too long to get into that career path of full time, trying to get a full time professor job somewhere. I'm doing fine the way it is.

JW: Are there still artists in this area, then?

BB: Oh yeah, there's, it's not like it was where you would, you know Sunday brunch, it wasn't really called brunch back then but Sunday you'd go to Alvin's which was a club down Cass this way towards 94 and we would meet down there Sunday and just hang out and have coffee and

sandwiches. It was a deli, too, and just kinda hang out as a community, you know, you'd sit around and talk about art or whatever. Other things people talk about, you know, their friends or enemies. So there's still, it's not as cohesive as it used to be but I think that's true with your generation. Aren't you more on your socializing on Facebook or other social media than –

JW: Yeah sometimes.

BB: - than face to face. So back then you'd have to actually get together to talk. Or you could talk on the phone but phones were weirder back then, too. You couldn't just call someone in California because it would cost too much money cause they had charges for long distance and stuff. So usually it was you'd just meet somewhere in the real world. [laughs].

JW: Who are some of the local artists you work with now that you admire?

BB: Oh, okay. I would say Bob Sestok is still around. Nancy Mitchnick, definitely. She came back and I was super happy about that and I got to meet her and hang out with her and we're friends now. And so I would say tat she would be some of my biggest influence. And she's going to have a show at MOCAD, the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, a big show in the spring, I think it is. So she would be, I would say my friends, Trisha Soderberg is still painting, Lyla Kadaj. I have studio space but they're, the guy next to me, Peter Bernal, who just moved here to work with the DIA, he, we're friends. I don't know if his work influences me now. At this point in my life, I pretty much just influence myself. At the moment I'm influenced by photographers. Dead photographers pretty much. And just kinda however I come across them if they pop up in my media, like, "oh I really like that photo. That's a really great photo" and then I'll investigate more about their work. Then then I've been painting from photographs, which is new for me in the last three years. I'll either paint from my photograph or from this work that's like, "oh that really inspires me" or "I really like that" that somehow strikes a chord with me that I want to paint that. So I don't know if we really influence each other in a direct way anymore like maybe we used to. Or at least for me.

JW: Has Detroit and the Cass Corridor itself influenced your work? You've mentioned mostly photographs but are you more influenced by the photographs and the people or the area around here influence your work as well?

BB: The environment, I would say the environment has a huge impact on me. Most of my life I've gone through in and out of depression a lot and I found that when I moved back to Detroit in 2002 when I first moved back to the Eastern Market area, my whole mood just lifted and I haven't experienced depression since I moved back to Detroit and I don't know why but there's something about this are that in spite of all it's, well it's not that gritty anymore, but in spite of all it makes me somehow feel happy and I feel maybe it's the familiarity of it and also the, I do like change. I sound like I don't. Like when I walked in Kresge and that door which is where I usually would enter [unintelligible] "Where are the card catalogs?" you know? It's just little things like that change and have kind of a, I guess it's a gestalt kind of feeling, like, "Oh, I remember things. When did that building move over here?" It would be the same building but it felt like it was in a different place. So I like memory in that way in how you remember things and the image of the memory that you have in your head and then when you see it in reality it's

like, “Oh , I guess that building has always been there even though I remember it being on the other side of the street or something.’ So its kind of weird but I do like this spot in the world. There’s some kind of comfort me and I feel like I’m comfortable here and I guess it feels like home. It makes me happy to be here compared to Lansing maybe. It’s just that comparison. Or the contrast to Lansing that I like being here.

JW: Are there any particular overarching messages you try to convey with your paintings?

BB: I guess, like many artists, it’s a lot about me. They call that naval gazing and I’m interested in emotion and memory which is all personal, right? I’m more of a romanticist than an intellectual. So there are some painters that are intellectual but I’m more of a, I’m interested in the emotion of what’s going on and how as a painting develops, especially as when I’m working with someone else’s photograph, I’ll see as I’m painting, I’ll see things in it that I may not have seen when I first looked at the photo. There’s one painting that I did that was this huge painting. Twelve feet in height by ten feet. And as I’m painting, I’m working with this photograph. There’s a door in the background, and all of a sudden, it’s like, oh, I hadn’t thought about it but it’s like what’s going on beyond that door? And that may have been part of the photographer’s original intention. It had kind of this eerie, kind of spooky. The photo was taken in an old Victorian unoccupied house with kind of crumbling plaster so it had this kind of eerie, spooky kind of feel to it. So as I’m painting it, the more I’m painting, the more these emotions are coming out like “eeooo.” It’s kind of scary to think about what’s going on back in the dark recesses of the painting. So it’s that’s kind of a feeling going back and forth between me and the work and how things emerge from the painting as I’m working. It kind of intrigues me.

JW: Do you work with any other mediums besides paint?

BB: No. Not really, I can sew but that’s not –

JW: Yeah. What kind of painting –

BB: It’s oil.

JW: Oils?

BB: Oil painting. Oil on canvas. And so I build my own structures.

JW: Do you have any advice for artists who are just starting out now?

BB: Yeah, I would say go to as many museums and look at as much stuff as you can and go to get your art history in place. Because you’re going to draw a lot of inspiration from that. From the history of art and what’s gone on before you and where is art going in the future and I hope it’s not conceptual [laughs]. A friend of mine, I work at the DIA also, and a friend of mine was telling me, she just graduated from art school and she was saying that craft is coming back into the art world, like the craft of painting or the craft of sculpture. So I was really happy hear that because for a long, for the last, I remember being in art school in the 70s when conceptualism was just beginning and I hated it then and I still pretty much don’t like it. So I was happy to hear

about the craft of a discipline coming back. So painting may be getting a revival so I'm happy about that. I would say for students just coming into it, just cause otherwise if you're just trying to work on your own work constantly, you're just going to lose motivation, I would think. And to just go to other people's studios, see what's going on. Go to the art openings. Go to the museums for sure. Go to the galleries and make your connections. You know, network at the galleries and at the art openings. And just hanging out with your friends, whoever that may be.

JW: And then do you have any advice for current or future residents of the Cass Corridor or Midtown, whichever name ends up winning?

BB: Okay, what was the beginning of the question?

JW: Do you have any advice for future residents of this area?

BB: [laughs] besides Stay Out? Let me think. I guess if it depends on where the people would be moving from. There are a lot of people moving from Brooklyn or New York or wherever, I would say to those people moving in from another cool location like Brooklyn, just to be respectful of what's going on here and not try to come in and help us. Detroit really doesn't need anyone's help because we've been here for a long time and so this kind of coming in and Oh, we're going to help Detroit. It's really that kind of, I don't know, they can just come in and be respectful and just be cool. But if they're coming from the suburbs or, I came from the suburbs, I don't know. You don't have to, I don't know. I don't know what to say about that. I guess just be observant and respectful of what's going on and be aware that people are being pushed out of the neighborhood. People who have lived here for a long time because they can't afford their rent anymore so just be respectful of that and maybe wherever they're moving, I know a lot of people from Brooklyn are moving over on the east side over by Belle Isle and Jefferson Chalmers a really rough, it used to be a really rough neighborhood, and I was just told that some people from Brooklyn are moving in. They're buying cheap houses, you can can buy a house, or you could have bought a house for five or six thousand dollars a few years ago. Buying the houses and then just sitting on them and thinking, well maybe someday I'll want to move there so you have people from out of town buying houses and just letting them be vacant. That's not helping anyone either. So it's just a tricky it's a balancing act. Move to Detroit but try to fit in. Don't think that, I don't know. I don't have a good answer for that.

JW: That's okay. Do you have any other thoughts that you have about the Cass Corridor?

BB: I think we've covered –

JW: Well, alrighty

BB: -a lot.

JW: Yeah we did. Well thank you very much for coming in and talking to me. I really appreciate it.

BB: And I appreciate you. That was a good interview. You had kind of a – it was a good interview in that you pulled out a lot of things that I'd forgotten about or you made it easy to talk to.

JW: Oh good. Thank you.

BB: That was really good. Thanks.