Questions (Jay):

1. What is your hometown? New York City. Born in the Bronx. Grew up much of my childhood in Rockaway Beach, by the ocean. Wasn’t a typical city life. After college I moved to Park Slope, in Brooklyn, which is now the only neighborhood outside of Manhattan that is more expensive than Manhattan . It is the largest concentration of brownstones in the country.
2. If you could move to another city, would you? I have lived in a few other cities, but no, I wouldn’t move.
3. If so, what city? NA
4. What neighborhood do you live in? Right now I live in, I guess the technical name is “Speedway Terrace.” One would identify it as Crosstown. But by historic designation, it is called Speedway Terrace. You could ask why is it called “Speedway Terrace.” In the early 1900s, north Parkway was a dirt road. And on the weekends, the city allowed horse racing. Then, and I don’t have a date for this, the city decided to asphalt North Parkway, so they banned horse racing.
5. How long have you lived in Memphis? I took a couple of breaks out of town, but I would say since mid 1983. But I have lived simultaneously in Santa Fe, NM. While in Santa Fe, I never shut my business down. I had a brick & mortar on Union . With some exceptions, I would drive back and forth between Memphis and Santa Fe. The average trip one-way was 15 and a half hours. And I did that for years because my work in Memphis superseded my work and life in Santa Fe.
6. How would you describe the City of Memphis in three words? I like the energetic attitude, not only of young people that are here are committed. And a sense of commitment to the City is what rules my connection here. If I didn’t feel it, I would move on. The level of friendliness and the level of energetic commitment and a certain kind of… with all the other frustrations that people have with any city historically, I supersede that with certain people that have attitudes of great commitment to see the city evolve. Again, that for me it what really gets me going. Many days strangers come in my door and I can’t always make it happen, there is an almost instant friendship connection. I have an AirBNB that I run on the side. And when we have people come in, I will call up my wife and ask, “how are the kids doing?” Sometimes they are older than I am, but they are in my environment, my home, and I very much care about their experience here.
7. What were your first impressions of Memphis? Back in 83, I came here with maybe 4 or 5 cartons of art. I took a plane, and in those days I actually flew with cardboard cartons of art. So I came here having set up through friends in Memphis, an exhibition. When I got in town I called the place where the planned exhibition was going to be, and they informed me that the company was in bankruptcy. And my first thought was, “wouldn’t have been nice if you had called me before I made this trip here?” So I told my friends in town what happened and they made a few phone calls. That day that I got here, completely unknown to everyone but a couple of people, the college of art now was the Art Academy, they offered me a show immediately. They didn’t even know me, and I thought “wow, this town is great!” That was my first impression.
8. What is your current impression of Memphis? There is more happening now, I don’t have any data, but based on articles that I have read, there are tens of billions of dollars of construction projects, in different stages, going in Memphis. So my impression is, I feel the growth, I feel the commitment, and particularly in some younger entrepreneurs, you know a lot of people criticize the millennial community, but I see some young developers who have this really terrific attitude where they are going to make something happen. I am working on some really major projects right now; I think they are going to have fabulous impact on the City. I am extremely enthusiastic. I had a phone call this morning from someone who was bitching and moaning about how large the black community is and I was saying you got your facts wrong. They are involved in the arts and they were telling me they were thinking of moving to Atlanta. So I Googled “Atlanta Art Scene” and one of the first articles I came upon from a major art dealer in Atlanta was that it is a struggling market. See, everyone always thinks it is better somewhere else. Certainly Memphis does not have the quantity of art galleries that Atlanta does and not even close to the quantities of galleries that Santa Fe has. But Santa Fe, NM is beyond challenged right now. But I am encouraged, I have been invited to be in a young entrepreneur’s group, and clearly much older than anyone else involved, I’ve also been invited on several occasions to be a part of African American art-related groups, a funny aside, The Civil Rights Museum folks , maybe a decade or so ago, came to see me because they knew my work with the black community that they made me an honorary black man.
9. Do you feel Memphis has improved while you have lived here? Yeah, some people think it has been a radical improvement, I have been here long enough, and I have been in and out, that to me, what is happening now, though maybe technically wrong, it doesn’t feel gigantically different to me. I mean I came here as a New York City kid and everyone aid that “you must have felt culture shock.” No, I really felt I fit in. So I think the numbers in the black community has gone up a little, I think in the 80s it was close to 50 percent, now it is 63 I think. So it didn’t feel to me like the City was going nowhere and suddenly there was this spike. I think it has been moving slowly. And I am positive about what I see.
10. What is your funniest story about living in Memphis? I could say being made an honorary black man. Well maybe this is not a funny story. Let me share this one quick aside. I have a dear friend in the black community who owns maybe half a dozen shoe-shine operations. He is kind of a mobile guy, he has a couple of permanent places. And so several years back I had an exhibition at Leadership Memphis on south Main. So I invited my friend, I asked him if he could bring a double set-up for shoe shine. I am going to pay you for the evening, but I am going to offer complimentary shoe-shines. And it was really quite phenomenal. But somebody later said to me “weren’t you concerned that it might be seen as a racist thing?” “Black man, shoe-shine” I said #1 the history of shoe-shining came from London, #2 my friend supports his family of four or five kids, he has five locations, he has a web site, he has a Youtube video with commentary from some from the African American community politicians in town. I said there is no shame there, he is doing what he is very good at. So I am blessed to have his friendship and to have some fun by saying come to an art opening and have a complimentary shoe-shine. The lead in from Leadership Memphis is that my year was 2002. It was an interesting year because it was post-911 and it was still on everyone’s psyche. Ours was the best class, ever. So every month we had different field trips. One trip we went to some old industrial complex, one of the discussions was about the history of the Pinch District. At some point they talked about the history of Jews in the Pinch District. After that session ended, there was a Q&A and black lady asked “Just what does a Jew look like? So I stood up and did a 360. That afternoon, all the black women wanted to have lunch with me. How could I have not stood up? I already knew that I was the token Jew in this class of 2002.
11. If you could change something about Memphis, what would it be? If Memphis had an ocean. I know it has a river. If Memphis had an ocean and mountains. I live on North Parkway and I overlook the Crosstown building. So I say the building is my skyscraper (my NY connection), it is my mountain (that is the Santa Fe connection) and the river is my ocean. So I found my peace in that little part of town. I even said this; my first regular commercial gallery space was in Cooper Young in 1989. What is now DKDC was my first gallery. And the Beauty Shop was a functioning Beauty Shop and I felt like I had moved to Mayberry. There were no restaurants. Steve Crumps Café Ole was his woodworking studio. There was very little here but I had a feeling about the neighborhood. I am working on a very large project, so if I could have changed something I would have tried harder to have started the project a decade ago. The head of my board is the head of Latino Memphis. Their community is suffering. And part of my project is a multi-cultural research center. With a slight focus on African American and Latino art forms and culture. And so there will be a lot of opportunities for people of those communities to actively share and learn about their own cultural past. I am also linked to the University of Memphis and the African American studies. Earnestine Jenkins is a brilliant woman and is the head of African Studies at the University. And the University is having meetings about creating curriculum and potentially new degree programs based on what I am bringing to the City. That is pretty exciting.
12. This web site only captures a snapshot in time. What would you like someone twenty years from now who reads this to know about you? That I am tenacious, determined, and a word that came up a few weeks ago, steadfast. It came to me through a friend who is a Reike master. So she share this entity that came into her life. I was taking a trip to look at an important collection that I need to have. And she said that she has this entity and could I send him on this trip with you? When I got back from the trip, I told her that this entity only said one word to me. There was no discussion, no laughing, no playfulness, it was just a kind of quietude and then he said one word, “steadfast.”
13. What is your favorite thing about Memphis? It’s not the food, it’s not the elevation, it’s what I say that keeps me here. The people that I have been able to connect with. People say that new Yorkers are not friendly. You know what; I was a friendly New Yorker. I was a caring New Yorker. Once when I was younger, and stronger too, I tried to break up a fight in Santa Fe. I got kicked hard by a guy that had completely lost his mind. We pinned him down and I put my hand on his head and told him that “this has got to end now.” I probably was not at a point when I should have been interceding, but I just had to. And I hear people say that people in Paris are not friendly, or people in New York are not friendly. And you are not friendly unless you communicate. I never met a stranger, that has always been my profile.