THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Art | In Conversation

Dewey Crumpler with Constance Lewallen

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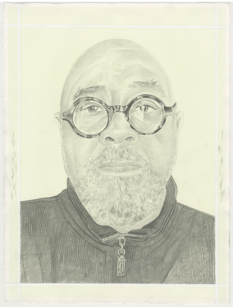

Portrait of Dewey Crumpler, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

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Dewey Crumpler is an artist, professor, and long time participant in San Francisco’s cultural conversations. As a muralist, he’s made work that is in direct conversation with older public artworks deemed politically insensitive. Crumpler prefers artwork that challenges social stigmas to be discussed rather than destroyed or hidden from sight. His paintings of hooded figures, currently on view at Cushion Works, were the impetus for the following conversation. We discuss Crumpler’s mural at George Washington High School, the enigmatic object that has influenced three decades of his creative work, and how teaching informs his art practice.

Constance Lewallen (Rail): Let’s start at the beginning. Although you were born in Arkansas, you are almost a San Francisco native, having graduated from Balboa High School, getting your BFA from San Francisco Art Institute, your Master’s from San Francisco State, and your MFA from Mills. Seems like you hit all the schools.

Dewey Crumpler: Right, I did.

Rail: You’ve been at the San Francisco Art Institute since 1989, where you teach painting, but also jazz history and African Studies.

Crumpler: Right.

Rail: The way I see it, your artistic career breaks down into two sections. First, you created figurative murals, and later, often very lush painting, sculptures, video, and installation. Let’s start with the George Washington High School mural controversy that began in the 1960s and became an issue again in recent years.

Crumpler: Right.

Rail: As we know, the murals, titled *Life of Washington*—a WPA project by Russian-born artist Victor Arnautoff—came under fire for its depiction of George Washington as a slaveholder and who is shown directing his men to step over the body of a dead Native American. We know that Arnautoff, a communist, did not support slavery and subjugation of Native Americans, quite the opposite. Rather, he was trying to recount historical truths that many people didn't know. You, yourself, said you didn’t know that Washington owned slaves, for example, since that fact wasn’t taught in school. Some students complained that the mural was racist and that it made them uncomfortable. The school board voted to remove it, but it stayed after there was a huge public outcry. When did you first see the mural, and how did you feel about it when you did?

Crumpler: I think it was 1966. I was going to Washington High School for a football game. As I passed through the Great Hall, I was confronted with a Native American sprawled out with settlers walking over the body, and as I proceeded toward the field, I saw these Africans holding the reins of his horse with George Washington standing next to them—I was shocked and really disliked the idea of the painting.

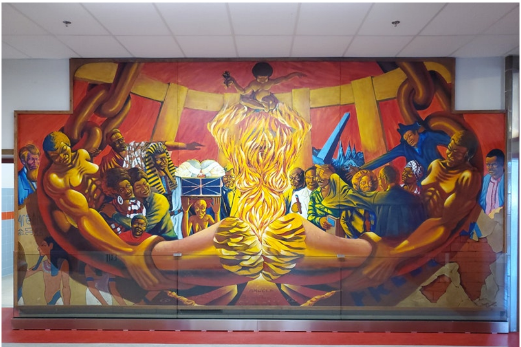
Rail: Even at that young age, you were getting involved in civil rights.

Crumpler: Yes. From the time I was in junior high school, I was going around the city, participating in demonstrations at the Sheraton Palace Hotel and the Cadillac dealership. And then, by the time I graduated toward the end of the 1960s, I became involved in the Black Arts movement. So, I was very active and, at the same time, drawing and painting pictures about the civil rights movement, showing my work around town, being written about in the newspapers, and even appearing on local television in relationship to that work.

Rail: The Black Panther students demanded that the school hire an artist to create a new mural in an adjacent location that told a more empowering story.

Crumpler: It was a long, drawn-out process that involved dozens of meetings and arguments and difficulties. I went around the country, looking and studying murals and, ultimately, to Mexico to do the same. When I got to Mexico, Elizabeth Catlett invited me to dinner with one of the greatest muralists in Mexico, Pablo O’Higgins. He was very magnanimous and invited me to his studio. He mentioned that David Alfaro Siqueiros was painting a mural in downtown Mexico City and that I should go by there and look at it. I did, and I met him, as well.

Rail: Tell me about your mural at George Washington High School.



Dewey Crumpler, *Multi-Ethnic Heritage: Black, Asian, Native/Latin American* (Detail), (1974). At George Washington High School. Courtesy the artist.

Crumpler: It's broken into three sections. There is the African American section, the Asian section, and then the Latino section, designed to all work together.

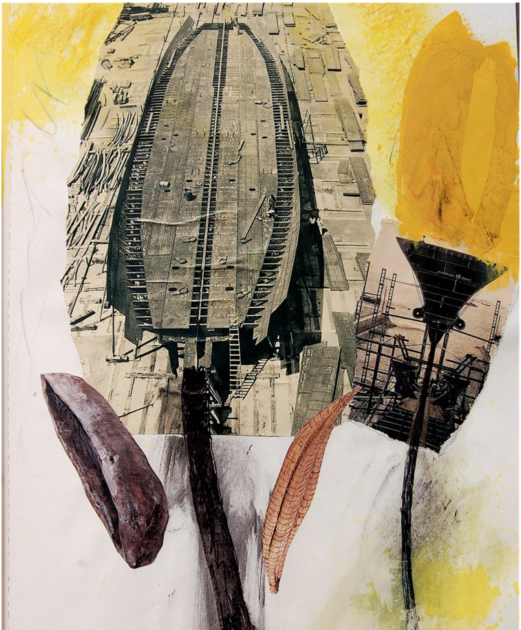
Rail: The controversy arose again in recent years. And, again, the Board of Education voted to cover the murals. Luckily, just recently, the case went to trial, and the judge said the board had no authority to do that. And so, as far as I know, for the moment, the murals are protected.

Crumpler: That's correct.

Rail: Similarly, Philip Guston's paintings of Ku Klux Klan-like hooded figures caused his retrospective to be postponed—it will open next year—instead of using the subject matter as a teaching opportunity, a way to talk about difficult subjects, rather than whitewashing them.

Crumpler: You have repeated what I've said many times.

Rail: You went on to paint other murals, but let's move on to your easel work, starting with a series that you refer to as "tulips." What inspired you to paint tulips?



Dewey Crumpler, *Tulip Notebook*, 1995. Mixed-media. Courtesy the artist.

Crumpler: At the time that I was making murals, I was also making abstract work in my studio. Many years later, in the 1990s, I went to Amsterdam and visited the Van Gogh Museum, which had just been completed, and stopped off at the Keukenhof Gardens, where I saw a field of tulips moving in the breeze ever so slightly. It reminded me of when I used to go to garage parties as a kid in high school in blue light-filled rooms with Black people dancing, undulating in this rhythmic way with their afros, moving in the light. The symbolism was merged at that moment. I was stunned by them. I traveled to Paris, went to my hotel and I started drawing tulips, then painting and collaging them. The history of tulips became important to me, because the tulips had gone through a similar relationship in their history, as did Black people's bodies. They had been used as commerce. They had been genetically manipulated to serve a larger power economic context. For me, those tulips became metaphors for an economic system.

Rail: Implicit in what you said is that as Africans were taken from their country and sent around the world, so were tulips.

Crumpler: Yes, I didn't see a flower so much as I saw history.

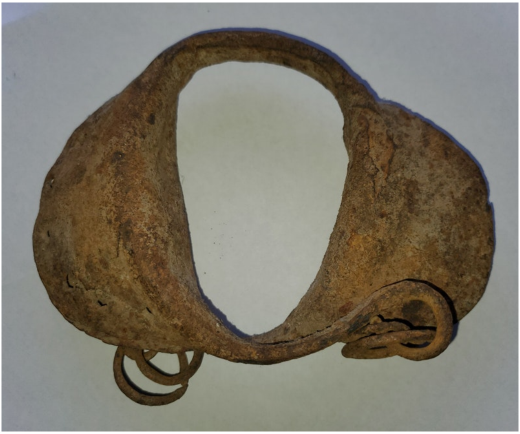
Rail: You created an entire body of work around the metaphor of the tulip, from painting, to works on paper, to sculpture. Was this the first time you ever made three-dimensional work?

Crumpler: Yes, they necessitated that kind of investigation. I trained myself to find a way to express it.

Rail: You had a show that was called *Of Tulips and Shadows*, in 2008 at the California African American Museum in Los Angeles, accompanied by a catalog that contains a couple of wonderful essays and some works that go beyond the tulips. For example, a section that relates to works you made based on shackles. How did you come to use that form?

Crumpler: When I was making tulips, the form of the tulip became very useful to me, because the bud of the tulip, when it is closed, looks like a head. One day I was in Marcus Books in San Francisco, and was looking at a book about the Atlantic slave trade. As I was turning the pages, I saw this void that looked like a head but, in reality, was an iron object that expanded on both sides, the center of which looked like a head. It was described as a slave collar; the head of a slave would poke through that space. The expanding edges look like shoulders. It was as if you were looking down on it, which made me see that object spiritually, as if from a position of omnipotence. And it was that which keyed me into this object. I bought the book and tried to explore this object in the same way that I had with the tulips. I began investigating it through drawings, paintings, and finally through sculpture. And every time I did, the shadow of the form started to appear, and images started to operate within it. That persisted for years until one day, as I was looking at that object, and the shadow became prominent. I began to try to understand what produced that shadow. One day I was telling my kids to clean up their room, because they had thrown stuff all over it, and, as I was getting ready to turn back, I saw this, this hoodie, strewn between the chair and the wall, and it looked like a body was in it. It was, in fact, empty, but it looked like somebody or something was in it. That made me think about what that shadow was—it was both presence and absence. I ran to my studio and started drawing what I thought produced this image.

Rail: Is that when that hoodie figure emerged?



Collar for enslaved person. Undated.

Crumpler: From that moment on it became a form that would appear now and then in my consciousness, and I would start painting or drawing it. It wouldn't happen all the time, since it wasn't the principal object of my inquiry. But, every now and then, over the almost 30 years that I've been dealing with that form, it would emerge. It only appeared obliquely when I was watching television. About a year later, I found this object in the flesh in an African store. The store had two of these objects, and I immediately bought them and brought them home. And that's when I found out that this was not just an object that was used as a slave collar. I started to do research on this object and found it to be a device that was designed in Africa and used for dance and spiritual rituals. I wondered what kind of mind would take an object that was designed for spiritual transformation and turn it into an object of capture and ridicule. The psychotic mind that could create such a relationship or such a situation was unbelievable, and that made the object much more potent. It produced the shadow that I became interested in. If I hadn't bought that object, I wouldn't have got to this iteration, because everything I have been working on for the last 30 years has been related to that object.

Rail: The idea of transformation, or metamorphosis, seems to be a concept that is present in almost everything you do.

Crumpler: That's right.

Rail: The slave collar becomes a sculpture. You made them very decorative, in fact.

Crumpler: That's right, because each of those moments represents a period in history. They articulate time, as do most of the works that I engage in. When you look at them, they represent present time and past time.

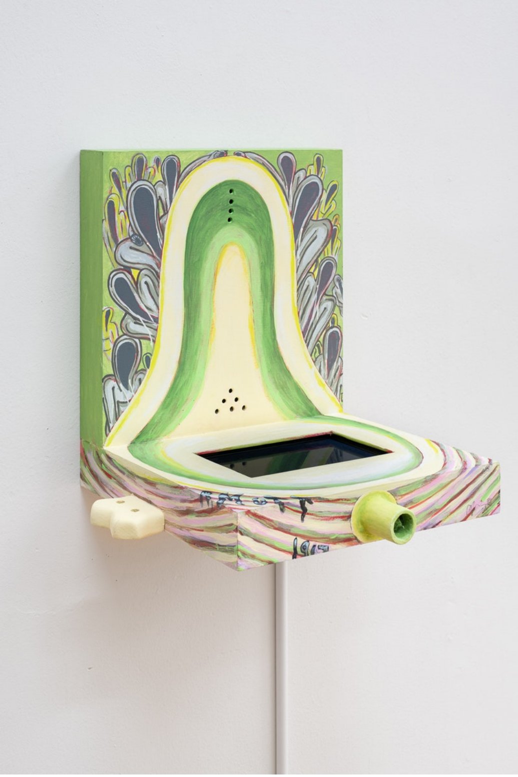
Rail: I was struck with how powerful it is to see a gallery full of them, over a hundred. Sometimes I am reminded of cartoon characters.

Crumpler: Yes.

Rail: And of Guston's hooded figures we referred to previously, which derive, in this case, from the Ku Klux Klan, but it's a similar idea.

Crumpler: Yes.

Rail: You have inserted into these paintings references, artists. I was especially struck by a sculpture that hangs on the wall in the form of Duchamp's *Fountain*. In the horizontal section, you have embedded a video of water.



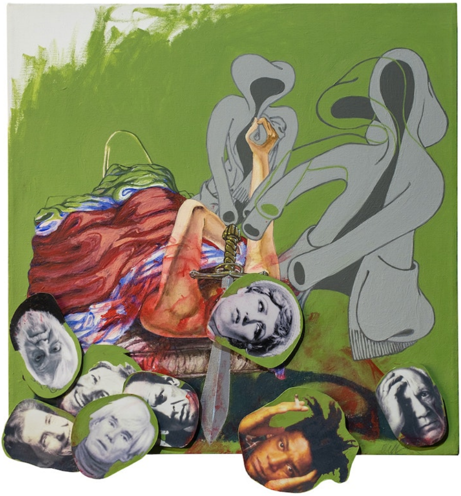
Dewey Crumpler, Streaming 1, 2021. Courtesy Cushion Works.

Crumpler: Not only water—the hoodies are peeing into the fountain.

Rail: It's not the only work in the show in which you have inserted videos. Is that something new?

Crumpler: I've been doing video since, oh, since the Betamax camera came out, and I continue to. I have videos in every format. I've always been fascinated with and involved with video. The only drawback was that, historically, it was difficult to deal with video—it was so expensive, but as it became less expensive, I made more and more videos. In the show in Los Angeles there were several videos. One video was related to the *ringshout*, which was a particular African American spiritual process to the early development of sacred music. The hoodies operate both in the spiritual dimension and the secular dimension.

Rail: In one of the hoodie series called "Narrative Number Three" in your current show at Cushion Works in San Francisco's Mission District, you collaged photos of heads onto the canvas.



Dewey Crumpler, *Rollem*, 1998. Mixed-media. Courtesy Cushion Works.

Crumpler: Yes, they are placed differently each time the piece is shown. This is the last time I will be showing the hoodies. If it weren't for the urging of Jordan Stein and his co-curator, Sampada Aranke, I wouldn't have shown the work now.

Rail: Why?

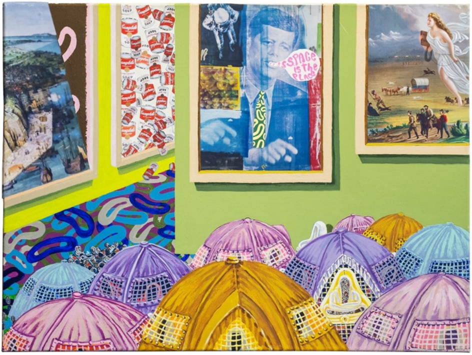
Crumpler: That work wasn't meant to be shown. A few of the hoodies were in the Los Angeles show at the insistence of the curator, but in a separate area so as not to confuse the audience. Even when my bodies of work seem to be disconnected, for me they are all part of the same language and thought, but that seeming disparity can be confusing.

Rail: There's one hoodie that really struck me. It's a small canvas based on Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Son.* I assume you feel an affinity for the artists represented, from Picasso to Jean-Michel Basquiat to Cindy Sherman. Are these meant to be a kind of an homage?

Crumpler: Well, in all the work, I try to stay out of interpretation.

Rail: [*Laughs*]

Crumpler: The point is to try to make it interesting enough that an audience will be compelled to check out the work. It's the same thing I was doing in the murals, putting enigmas in them, so people had to figure them out. I've spent all my life in the arts. From childhood, I would go to museums. I used to get dropped at a museum and spend all day there. And it was that way until I got to be in high school. As I became more involved in the Black Arts movement and the Black Power movement, and when I saw in those museums no reflection of myself, no deep interest in African American thought, I quit going to local museums. I've traveled for a good deal of my life. Of course, I would never go anywhere where I didn't go to museums, but locally, the museums just had nothing to offer other than what I was already learning in college, in other words the great gods of Western art history. We were taught that art is driven by movements and style. And if one doesn't adhere to the current popular style, one is displaced immediately for whatever's current. And because linearism is so important in the West, artists are used to reinforce that process of so-called progress and Manifest Destiny. Because the hoodies are cosmic entities of consciousness when they appear in those gray cloaks, they reflect contradiction. And they point out, obliquely, the nature of those contradictions. So, what you saw in that particular piece was a sort of play, with the heads of a time sequence, like each one of those artists come in a particular epoch, and they become the gods of that epoch.



Dewey Crumpler, *Modern Grid*, 2020. Mixed-media. Courtesy Cushion Works.

Rail: How do the hoodies relate to these so-called gods?

Crumpler: I have great respect for all the artists that I deal with. In fact, as I said, I don't always choose them. As I'm working on them, I don't know what these hoodies will choose for me to make. And I mean that. I know that sounds strange, and like I'm making that up. But I'm not making that up. Because when I started that painting, I was thinking about Artemisia Gentileschi *Judith Slaying Holofernes.* I did not know how it was going to articulate itself. That was the case with Goya because Goya, particularly his black paintings, is just overwhelming. They are just so magnificent. I've seen many of them in person. And of course, as a maker, you can't help but try to understand the extraordinary mind that brought reason sleeping into being, you know?

Michelangelo, putting those two fingers together to create a chasm, that in its micro relationship looks like just an inch or two, but, in reality, it represents the universe. For me, it's unbelievable. So yes, I look at Western gods as they are secularized in the arts. They represent larger forces of control. Not only because what they make can be used in that larger context to produce an ideology, not that the artists are trying to do this. It's the culturalists who select these artists and use these artists as a way of becoming exemplars of power dynamics that they are interested in exploring themselves. That's the case in the present. And that was the case in the Pharaonic period, or even during the Roman Empire, when artists were elicited to make shock and awe images for reverence. And that's what artists still do.

Rail: You have said that no matter what you do, even if it's not immediately evident, everything has to do with the African American experience.

Crumpler: In part, but not completely. African Americans have always existed in the world. It's the world that I'm primarily interested in, how it is governed economically, how those economic forces produce frameworks, and even contradictions. African Americans are not, in my work, manipulated; they are active. In that particular work, they are always engaged in action with agency. They don't belong to any time. They are timeless.

Rail: You've been a teacher for so long, Dewey. Does teaching in any way inform your work? Or do you see it as a separate activity?

Crumpler: Well, it always informs your work, because one of the great things about teaching is that you are always challenged. Your position is never solid, because you are confronted every four or five years with another group of students who have almost no knowledge of the past. They reinvent what they think is new. As you have the benefit of age, you can see that, and you try to stimulate in them not a collapse of that desire for what they feel is new, but an encouragement of it. It makes you work harder to understand what *you* have believed in. When you look at it in terms of time, teaching is profoundly rewarding. And I have had the benefit of not only teaching for most of my life, but coming into contact with future "freaks."

Rail: John Baldessari, who taught for most of his life, was one of the few artists I know who always said that he learned from his students.

Crumpler: I'm still learning from my students, and they keep teaching. Even when they leave, they teach me more.

Rail: And you teach not only painting, but, as noted earlier, you teach the history of jazz.

Crumpler: And I have also taught African American art and African culture. But I always teach it in relationship to art history in general. Because nothing happens in a vacuum. And, therefore, to teach African American art as only a Black thing, would be to do exactly what white people have done throughout their history, which is to only operate myopically through the power that they think they represent. I always teach from the point of view of how African thought manifests in the world and is manifested through the world. So, it's a "both/and" situation.

Rail: And over the years that you taught, I'm sure there weren't all that many African American students.

Crumpler: No, unfortunately, the economics in the country have produced inadequacies. And the arts revealed this better than most other subjects. Next to, say, business, art is very expensive, because it is always related to power. Art has always hung out in the powerful, and among the powerful, and therefore the powerful have created conditions in relationship to art so that the powerless have a great deal of difficulty asserting their agency inside this weight. And so yes, unfortunately, I have never taught large numbers of African Americans, because I've taught in institutions where, even if they try to recruit African Americans in the school, it's not always a full ride. They have to pay some tuition, which reflects the economics of the institution—it reflects the society at large.

Rail: We can hope that things are changing in that regard, not just at the San Francisco Art Institute, but in general.

Crumpler: I think that change is inevitable. Since the collapse of colonialism, change has been afoot. It took over 50 years for the landscape in the arts to begin to change fundamentally by the 1990s. And, it has struggled its way up until say, the last moment, and I must say this, this is difficult to admit. For progress to happen, it always seems to take a Black death. Every time a Black person is murdered or beaten and is on the TV news, a temporary change takes place. And over time, those bodies, they mount up, and it looks like progress. But whose progress, and at what cost? That's often what I'm thinking about.

Rail: Would you be willing to say what you're working on now in your studio?

Crumpler: Well, yes; over the last three or four years I have been engaged with a body of work related to a phenomenon at the end of the 19th century called the cakewalk. The cakewalk was a dance that African Americans in the throes of reconstruction developed. The white plantation owners would offer a cake to the best dancer. African Americans produced this dance as a critique of white pretense as they tried to act like their betters, the English aristocrats. So, Blacks made a dance of it—these backwater hicks, dressing up like French and English aristocracy stumbling over themselves. That dance would have a future cultural impact on modernism.

Rail: Wasn't it in the 1920s that the cakewalk was popular?

Crumpler: Yes, exactly, the cakewalk became the Charleston, became the Lindy Hop. The Roaring Twenties were an expression of what was already 40 years old. Josephine Baker took the transformation of the cakewalk to France. After African Americans had brought a type of music into France that was so powerfully different, that even the people who invented the instruments, didn't believe that those instruments could make that kind of sound. But the sonic intelligence that Blacks brought to the music changed the way music happened in the 20th century, and also operated within the move to modernism that would capture the entire century. So that's what I'm working on right now.

Rail: I'll be very curious to see how this manifests itself.

Crumpler: Yes. Right on. [*Laughter*]

Rail: Dewey, you're unpredictable.

Crumpler: I intend to be.

Contributor

Constance Lewallen

Constance Lewallen is adjunct curator at the University of California Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. She is Editor-at-Large for the