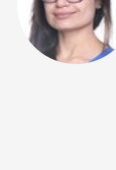


BANISHED

'If It's In The World, It's For Me'

Amna Khalid's Extended Interview with Dewey Crumpler



Amna Khalid
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Artist Dewey Crumpler, speaking in front of Victor Arnautoff's *Life of Washington* murals. (Screenshot from YouTube)

In [Episode One](#) of [Banished](#), we covered the controversy around Victor Arnautoff's murals, "Life of Washington" — a series of 13 paintings that cover the entrance and the hallway of George Washington High School in San Francisco.

One of the voices in the episode was Professor [Dewey Crumpler](#), an artist who was commissioned to paint so-called "response" murals to Arnautoff's in the late 1960s when "Life of Washington" first became controversial. In this extended interview, Crumpler waxes lyrical not just about the mural controversy, but also about the place of art in society.

"The most important place for young people to confront difficulty is in high school just before you get into the world," Crumpler told us. "If it's in the world, it's for me. If it's in the world, I have a right to know it. I have a right to experience it. And it's my youth that helps prepare me for it, even though it will be problematic. That's how we learn to overcome the difficulties."

Normally, extended guest interviews will only be available to paying subscribers, but we're sharing this one with all of you to give you a taste of the kind of content you can expect if you [subscribe](#) to Booksmart Studios.

* FULL TRANSCRIPT *

KHALID: This is [Banished](#), and I'm Amna Khalid. Welcome to a special subscriber-only episode of [Banished](#). We're sharing this one with all of you to give you a taste of the kind of content we have in store for paying subscribers to [Booksmart Studios](#). In [Episode One](#), we covered the controversy around Victor Arnautoff's murals, *Life of Washington*, which is a series of 13 paintings that cover the entrance and the hallway of George Washington High School in San Francisco. These paintings, which were commissioned in the 1930s as part of the New Deal Art Initiative, have recently come under fire. Some people in the community see the imagery as offensive, even traumatizing. For example, one of the murals depicts a dead Native American lying face down on the ground as Washington's troops walk past in their pursuit of westward expansion. Another portrays enslaved African Americans picking cotton and working at Mount Vernon. Just recently, the school board voted to cover the murals with panels at a cost of three quarters of a million dollars. But the alumni association has fought back and filed a lawsuit to prevent this from happening. As part of my research for the story, I interviewed Professor Dewey Crumpler, an artist who was commissioned to paint so-called "response murals" to Arnautoff's in the late 1960s when *Life of Washington* first became controversial. Professor Crumpler was only 19 when he painted his set of three murals titled *Multicultural Heritage*, which depict the historic contributions and struggles of African Americans, Native Americans, Asians, and other minority groups. Today, Professor Crumpler, who is based at the San Francisco Art Institute, integrates digital imagery, video, and traditional painting techniques to explore themes of globalization and the reduction of culture from a way of life to a mere commodity. Over the next 20 minutes, Professor Crumpler will discuss some of his other work, how he came to paint the response murals, and the importance of context in interpreting art. I had heard that Professor Crumpler saw those horrific photos of Emmett Till's brutalized body at a very young age. I began our conversation by asking him to reflect on that moment.

CRUMPLER: Seeing that image of Emmett Till as a six-year-old was traumatizing. And some of the students at George Washington High School were traumatized by seeing that image of a Native American on the ground dead. I empathize completely with those students and felt their pain. And I use that example in relationship to how one comes to grips with difficulty and how important it is for young people to know that they have support, but that the world is complicated, and they will learn to cope. Now, it became more apparent to me that art, that creativity, could do something very important. And so, I understood at a very early age that this was what I wanted to do.

KHALID: Could you tell us a little bit about how you identify as an artist? How would you describe who you are?

CRUMPLER: Well, culturally I identify as an African American. I don't shy away from that hyphenated reality. I identify myself not as an artist, but as a maker. I think the term "artist" is a flying signifier that moves in any direction that the culture deems necessary at a given moment. But a maker, which is what I believe myself to be, is capable of moving in any direction that interests them spiritually and physically and cognitively to express themselves in the world. And since I was a small child, I believed firmly in that power, because the power of creativity is an extraordinary power. And it really is personal in the sense that it is a projection of my ideas and feelings into the world. I see the creative process as a real privilege and as a real calling. I take it deeply seriously. That's sort of how I see myself as a maker.

KHALID: Let me pull you a little bit towards your container series. You've done a whole series of drawings and paintings and imagery that is depicting containers on ships. And as I was seeing some of those works, there was a lot about our current political moment, about movement of things and human beings that was speaking to me. May I ask you to elaborate on that?

CRUMPLER: I'd come back from Europe for the first time, and I'd become engaged with tulips because I went to Amsterdam, and I went to the Keukenhof Gardens. And I didn't see them as flowers. I saw them as history, the history of how a flower could become a commodity and how that commodity could become as important as human beings. In fact, they were treated like human beings. They were cultivated for their qualities, and they were experimented on. And their biology changed to create French tulips and German tulips and all these different kinds of tulips. When I got a bit older, I was attracted to the piers in Oakland, California. And I spent years going around those piers, and I wondered one day: why was I paying so much attention to these piers, to this place? It was the water, and it was those ships. And those ships had containers on them. And those containers were full of different colors like those tulips. And those ships really signaled to me time. Because the containers had ridges and those ridges created shadows. And shadows automatically signified time. And because they were about a rhythmic relationship to time, I saw them as similar to what has happened through American history. You could take containers and drop them off anywhere in the world, and they would operate the same everywhere in the world. And I was thinking that this is very much a system that is organized to reinforce capitalism, just like the transportation of bodies after Prince Henry developed a relationship to the caravel, which made the caravel the most efficient vehicle on the seas and permitted those so-called "explorers" to move across the planet, putting down stakes of ownership so that they could reinforce capitalism. And that's why in all those paintings that I made about containers, they're not really about containers. The containers are really markers of Cortez landing on the shores of South America. And those containers and their shadows are about the past, not about the present. They look like the present, but they are about the same system that has existed all the way back to the Phoenicians.

KHALID: Our conversation eventually turned to the subject of Arnautoff's murals and Professor Crumpler's own response murals that hang in George Washington High School in San Francisco. I asked him how he understood the sensibilities of the students back in the 1960s who first objected to these murals.

CRUMPLER: Well, first of all, I was one of those students. I was not much older than them. They were seniors in high school, and I was moving into my second year at Arts and Crafts in Oakland. I had been making artwork that followed the civil rights movement. And remember also that the 1960s was the hot point of the Black Power movement. And the Black Power movement was about identity and about the acquisition of power, and power meant the knowledge of yourself as a Black person in a country that stripped you of your knowledge of self. When they made a statement that they wanted those murals changed and taken down, the district said they were not going to do this, the students protested, and that's when I became involved, because the students, several of which had seen my work, wanted me to make another mural. The board said no, because I had no proven skills, I was a kid. A week or two later, some ink was thrown on the mural and that made the board decide, "OK, we're going to let him do it." I told the students that I would make the mural, and I would make a great mural equal to the mural in that other room. You know, the hubris of a young kid. And that I would only make the mural if they left that mural in place, because Arnautoff was trying to expose a history that should be told and understood, even though he knew that the imagery was not easy imagery.

KHALID: If I'm remembering your quotation correctly, you said your murals make no sense if Arnautoff's murals are taken away.

CRUMPLER: He wanted to tell a truth about the contradiction of a founding father who signed a document that said, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, and endowed with certain inalienable rights." He and those other signers of the great document, and it is a great document, while standing on the neck — while standing on the neck of African people who are under his boot, laying on the ground that belongs to the millions of Native Americans who also have died — shed blood fighting for their right to their space. So, I wanted to engage that idea of the founding, that idea of Native Americans, that idea of African Americans, that idea of Asians. I went to Mexico to learn mural painting. I had no doubt that I could paint that mural because my passion was in it. And I tried to create a worthy dialogue. But of course, once I had made that mural, the school board relaxed, and they didn't do what I said at the dedication they should do. You have to use those murals as teaching tools, and you have to put plaques next to them that explain them. Every generation is different. They confront new issues. And therefore, you have to give them information, otherwise they will misunderstand all the implications and symbolisms that are all over those murals. Whether it's Arnautoff or my mural in the future, unless something is done to explain them, to make them clear, this will crop up again. Do censorship and cancel culture is all around us. That's why art has to be free to do its work, even though it can make individuals very upset and angry. It's a worthy subject, that an inanimate object can actually do something to a human being, can make a human being think, can make a human being angry. But the point is, you have to work your way through it. Working your way through it is the point of life itself.

KHALID: So, Professor Crumpler, this is fascinating because what you're saying is that the school board reneged on its responsibility and promise, if I can say that, to contextualize these murals and to put up plaques explaining where they're coming from, which you had requested.

CRUMPLER: Yes. Let me just say that the most important place for young people to confront difficulty is in high school, just before you get into the world. So, a young person seeing difficult imagery — that's a perfect opportunity for teaching. OK, you're not going to read *Huckleberry Finn* because of some words. They're offensive. I was offended by them. But if it's in the world, it's for me. If it's in the world, I have a right to it. I have a right to know it. I have a right to experience it. And it's my youth that helps prepare me for it, even though it will be problematic. That's how we learn to overcome the difficulties. But those murals have to be contextualized. When you are young, everything looks larger than it is. When I saw those murals in 1966, I was incensed by them, and they looked huge. When I came back to engage them, they were much smaller, and I had come to understand much profoundly why he used those images. In fact, one of the people who had been most vociferous about taking those walls down, once he, like me, had graduated from college, he apologized to me: "Mr. Crumpler, I really appreciate what you painted. I appreciate those murals greatly. But if I understand what Arnautoff was doing, I would have never done what we did." He couldn't have come to that realization if I joined them and said, "Yes, let's tear this shit down, and when we tear it down, I'll paint over every bit of it."

KHALID: Professor Crumpler, one final question, what would you say to those on the school board today who have voted to cover up Arnautoff's murals?

CRUMPLER: All great art tells difficult truths. And they are always confronted with people who speak against them. And then they become central to the expression of human liberty. Arnautoff was a frail person, he was not some kind of heroic giant. He

was just a maker trying to demonstrate a contradiction. He used imagery that functioned in its time. But it's imagery based on a truth: that Native American lying on that ground, representing all of us who have struggled.

KHALID: Since I spoke with Professor Crumpler, a court has ruled on the petition by the alumni association to keep the murals up. Just this week, a state judge found that the school board hadn't fully considered all the alternatives to covering the mural. So, for now, the murals stay up. Of course, the school board may still appeal the decision, which means that we may not have heard the last of this case. But the broader questions remain. What is the place of controversial art in society? How do we reckon with difficult historical truths? Can we find a way to acknowledge the pain that some may experience without completely whitewashing the past?

If you enjoyed this conversation and would like to have access to more exclusive content, please consider becoming a paying subscriber. You can learn more about this show and our other offerings by going to [BooksmartStudios.org](#). [Banished](#) is produced by Matthew Schwartz and Mike Vuolo. N'Dinga Gaba and Chris Mandra mixed the audio.

This is [Banished](#). I'm Amna Khalid.