Oral History Interview with Tom Nussbaum, 07-03-2025

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Tom Nussbaum and Cliff Robinson conducted on July 3, 2025. The interview took place at the Princeton Public Library in Princeton, NJ as part of the Voices of Princeton Project.

VOICES
of Princeton

Tom Nussbaum has reviewed, edited, and approved the following transcript. Their corrections and amendments appear below in brackets with initials. Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

TRANSCRIPT

Cliff Robinson: [00:00:04] This is Cliff Robinson on July 3, 2025 at the Princeton Public Library as part of the voices of Princeton project. I'm here today with Tom Nussbaum.

Tom Nussbaum: [00:00:16] I'm Tom Nussbaum. I am the interviewee.

Cliff Robinson: [00:00:20] And I, Cliff Robinson, will also be the interviewer today. So Tom I guess I'll start by asking, how did you first come to have a relationship with Princeton?

Tom Nussbaum [00:00:35] I was invited to do two separate art projects. One preceded the other. The first one was actually at the library. And when the library was being rebuilt, the director and the board of the library wanted artworks for the children's library floor, and they had seen my work and approached me to make some sculptures for that floor. So I did a proposal, and the bunch of people from the library came to my studio, which at that time was in Bloomfield, New Jersey, and we put together a few sculptures that were then installed on the children's li–in the children's library section of the new library building.

Cliff Robinson: [00:01:40] That's great. And was the art committee of the library involved with this at all? Do you remember an art committee?

Tom Nussbaum: [00:01:50] I yeah, there were, there were a few people involved. It was quite some time ago. So I'm, I mean, I do remember Leslie, of course, who was the director at that time and a number of people came to my studio to look at my work, and we talked about placement of the work. And I actually did a commission piece also for that area, which was a specific piece for–made specially for the library, for the children's area. And one of the discussions that we had was that it was important to–at that time, I was making these figurative, small, figurative sculptures–and we all agreed on the importance of having the sculptures be touchable for the children, and that the kids would be able to interact and not have to feel like they were special pieces of art that could not be touched. So I ended up actually casting these pieces in bronze. They're painted. Each one is painted in pretty bright colors, and you don't, actually, you don't, you wouldn't know that they're bronze. But because they are, they're very–able to be touched, and the kids can handle them and interact with them at their own desire, and there's no issue with potential damage to the work, because they're all cast bronze.

Cliff Robinson: [00:03:34] Yeah, that's great. Did you, so it sounds like you chose this material–I guess–did you choose this material with children in mind, then? Or is this a preferred medium for you?

Tom Nussbaum: [00:03:45] Yeah, I, at that time, I was making these figurative sculptures, and they were made out of variety of materials that were all painted. And so it–the fact is that it didn't really matter what the material itself was, but for this particular location where we knew

that kids would want to touch and grab and pull and climb and do what kids do, for that reason they were made. That's the reason they were made in bronze.

Cliff Robinson: [00:04:23] Okay, and tell me about the colors that you chose for the four statues on the third floor of the library.

Tom Nussbaum: [00:04:33] The pieces, these figurative pieces, I often use different colors for the skin tones of the various figures. And in a way, the reason being, the reasoning behind that is that the figures are not meant to be specific people. They're meant to represent kind of the human race in general. Which comes in all different colors. And so when you look at these, you'll see that somehow they all have different skin tones and and they're kind of generalized figures. They're not meant to be portraits of any particular person, but they're sort of meant to represent the human race in general and in particular, in this case, kids, and some of the kids are interacting with animals, and one of the reasons I use animals is because that's symbolic of a relationship. So a child's relationship with an animal can also be a metaphor for a child's relationship with an adult, for example. So they're, they're kind of mythological in a way, and they are open to interpretation. And so when the kid sees a girl sitting cross legged with a giant crow on her lap, you know, the kid can feel something about this relationship and having experience. They can bring their own story and interpretation to the sculpture.

Cliff Robinson: [00:06:34] I'm noticing in the way you're describing, I think that's "Crow Girl," the one when they were describing, right? In the way you're describing it, I'm noticing that there, there are two dimensions of the tactile here, right? Like there's the sort of imagined aspect of contact that you can sort of see where the crow is situated across this girl's lap, and so there's that contact, but then there's also the touching of the children coming to view these objects and to interact with them. So I wonder, do you–is that like something that you planned out deliberately, or is that just sort of something that came out of the work?

Tom Nussbaum: [00:07:26] Yeah, well, I like to take credit for good ideas, and that's a good one, so I'll take credit for it. No, I mean, I–these are all things that you think about when, when you're when you're making art, and I've done a lot of art in public places, and so I do very much consider what the interactions are between the audience and the hard work itself. And I do in–with public art in particular, it is very important to me that people be able to feel free to explore it with their touch and tap. You know, have a tactile experience with it and–but it also, in the case of these particular pieces on the third floor, they also represent relationships that are about interactions. And in this case, with this, this is a very large, oversized Crow, kind of unrealistically large, sitting on this girl's lap. And so when you see the size of the bird, I think you know intuitively that you're not in the real world, that you're in a kind of imagined world, and and that's important, and therefore, the the that allows the children, in this case, or adults who see this work, to bring their own story to it. I mean, it's a library, and you're telling stories. And one of the great things about stories is that they pique the imagination and they allow people to think on their own terms about what the meanings are. And so these sculptures are meant to be read in multiple ways and be interpreted in multiple ways.

Cliff Robinson: [00:09:47] Yeah, that's great. Yeah. I think, like, the storytelling aspect of your work sort of naturally opens on to "Reader's Totem," which was the commissioned one, I believe?

Tom Nussbaum: [00:10:02] Yeah.

Cliff Robinson: [00:10:03] Yeah. Do you have any memories of how that commissioning process worked? Was it a conversation, or were you just asked to sort of come up with something that you felt was appropriate?

Tom Nussbaum: [00:10:17] Yeah, they all of the pieces at the library were based on artworks that I had previously made and and so there was a totem figure that was very similar, and I wanted to–what the totem does is it represents a family or a community standing on each other's shoulders, and so it's a tower of their five figures, and each one is standing on the shoulders of the other and, and it represents the community, kind of being together. I mean, the literal is like standing on each other's shoulders, but it's really meant much more metaphorically, that people depend on each other and count on each other. And it can represent either a particular family or community at large. One of the things here is that the figure on the bottom is a female figure. And I, I like the idea that in families and communities we're all standing on our mother's shoulders in some way and and that the female figure is, is kind of none of us would be here without, without that female figure standing at the bottom. So I wanted to kind of celebrate that

and then, of course, each one of the figures in this particular sculpture are holding books or carrying books, or the figure on top is a little pile of books that he's holding on his head. And that, of course, was in relation to the library and the importance of books and what they represent to a larger world.

Cliff Robinson: [00:12:32] As you were, as you were talking, I was remembering, in one of the other ones, bear with boy, I think it's called it had always in my mind, whenever I saw it, I was viewing it and thinking that it was like a boy with a male bear, but I'm realizing it could just as easily be a mother bear. And I'm, I don't know, I'm wondering how you react to that.

Tom Nussbaum: [00:13:00] Yeah, it's interesting. And this is, and here's a good example of, you know, you bringing something that you have to the story and, and I, in this case, you know, I, when I made that piece, it is a boy riding on the back of a bear who's standing on his hind legs, and he's standing up, and the boy is riding on him, and and, and I was thinking about fathers and sons in that in when I was making the piece, but it, it certainly doesn't–there's very little kind of gender identification in the in the bear. So, yeah, it is again, you know, it is open to interpretation and and, you know, I like the idea that sometimes, no matter who we are, you know, sometimes we feel like maybe we're the we're the bear who's holding somebody up or giving somebody a lift, and sometimes we're the rider and riding on the back of someone else. So, you know, if you think of it personally, sometimes you're the bear and sometimes you're the boy. And so it is, you know, again, it's, it's open to the stories and and one thing I love about having work like this that's with children, is that children are very uninhibited about saying

what it what it means to them, and bringing their stories and adults, you know, they've learned this idea that maybe I don't know what the artwork means, and I should ask the artist first what it means before I think about it, and kids don't have that inhibition, and so it's a great thing, when you have a bunch of kids looking at one of these pieces and asking them what they see in it, they bring a lot of interesting stories.

Cliff Robinson: [00:15:17] And I guess, in that same spirit, I think when we talked about it before you mentioned that "Fish Boy," that where they were situated in the library, that it's meant to be accessible, reachable again, so that if kids want to interact with it and touch these they can, yeah, but it strikes me again. It keeps the animal theme. It keeps the sort of over-large, unreal dimensions, I guess, like in I mean that in every sense of the word unreal, both in the sort of provocative sense of or evocative sense, but also unreal in the sense of, like, unrealistic, right? It's deliberately so. But I think one of the one of the questions that comes to mind for me is what feeling one takes away from it. And I suppose that could be open to interpretation, but, but, like, iconically, I suppose, you know, a boy catches a fish. This is sort of a, you know, a sort of archetypal image of childhood success of some kind. So I wonder, do you feel like the the affect there is meant to be one of pride, or is it? Is it just open?

Tom Nussbaum: [00:16:45] Yeah, I think, I think it's open. One of the things that I think about with fishing is that there's–well, first of all, I grew up in Minnesota, so, which is the land of 10,000 lakes, and there, there's a lot of fishing activity there. And as a child, I was often now fishing with various friends and family. And–but there is a again, you know, there is this

mythological world where, or metaphorical world where you're out on a boat and you put in this line and, and you can't see what's down there, and you don't know what's going to come in, and, and so, and there are, you know, references and mythology through the kind of millennia of the relationship of humans to the ocean and for the features that live under and what they represent. But, so, you know, when you when you get a nibble on your line, you don't know what's going to come up. You don't know if you're going to pull up something little and manageable or big and scary. And so this figure of the boy standing next to this large fish with his arm around the fish, it's kind of, it is a moment of like, okay, maybe this was something to be concerned about and, and now we're friends. So you can use it as a, I mean, I don't want to get too heavy into this, but it's, it's, you can use it also as a psychological metaphor, and so what are the things inside you that you're exploring and are afraid of, and what are the things that feel big inside you that you might want, might not want to bring up out of the water, or or you might want to, and and what you learn from them? So there's, you know, there's a connection to, you know, the archetypal mythology around the world, like that Jung was interested in, and that kind of imagery is certainly at play here also.

Cliff Robinson: [00:19:13] So you mentioned that you had two interactions, I guess, with Princeton. This was the first phase. And then there was a second as you became involved with the project on Hinds Plaza, off of Witherspoon Street, just across, just in front of the library, I guess. So I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about how you came to be involved in that project.

Tom Nussbaum: [00:19:43] Yeah, and so as a result of doing this project in the in the left within the library, a number of people in Princeton became aware of my work, and part of my practice at that time was making these smaller, figurative sculptures, and those are the ones that ended up in the library. But I also have, and have always had, a kind of active practice of making art in public places, outdoors, and that's a big part of my work, also, has been a big part of my work over the years, and and the committee was formed to choose public work, public to honor Albert Hinds, who for whom the plaza was named after. And Albert Hinds was a citizen of Princeton who was born in 1902 he lived to the age of 104, I believe, so, I think he died in 2006, if my math is right. And and he was an African American man, who lived in the Witherspoon neighborhood and right there. And was a very active part of the Princeton community for–off and on, but mostly on–for his whole life and and, and which was a very long life and and so the there was a committee formed, a search committee formed, to find an artist who would work on commemorating Mr. Hinds's life. And through their search, they looked at my work that was outdoor, outdoors in public places and they asked me to do a simple proposal, to see what I would come up with. And through that process, they did choose me as the commissioned artist to do this memorial. And I think, you know, there was a very esteemed committee of people who were put together to commission me. And in the beginning, I think they had an idea that they might end up with a sculpture of, like a bust of Mr. Hinds, or something pretty conventional. And I had this idea of making these gates that were open to the Plaza and and, and these gates are permanently open to the residents of the neighborhood. And so I started coming to Princeton to do research on Mr. Hinds' life, and and he led incredibly fascinating life, and I met with the committee a number of times, and I worked with Shirley Satterfield, who is a historian and prominent member of the African American community, who

gave me this wonderful walking tour of the neighborhood, and she was friends with Mr. Hinds, and she showed me the whole neighborhood and his house and his car that he drove and that was still parked behind the house where he had lived, and and the neighborhood, and she gave me a good history of the African American community there in Princeton, which I wanted to incorporate into my Project. So I designed these gates, which are use some symbolism to represent what Mr. Hinds's kind of main activity seemed to be, which was trying to bring the communities together, the African American community, and the rest of Princeton. And he was a member of the City Council, and he was very much into promoting kind of civil rights through the years. And is because he was born in 1902 he lived the whole kind of history of civil rights, of the Civil Rights movement in America. He lived that in his–in Princeton. So when he first went to school, he was going to totally segregated schools. And you know, when his grade schools were segregated, but he was also part of the first class of Princeton high school to be integrated. And his father or his grandfather had been an escaped slave who had come to Princeton from the South, and his father had worked in the dining halls of Princeton University at a time when the only African American people allowed on the campus were people who worked at the University. It was a segregated campus and he lived through the history of the civil rights movement in America by living his whole life through the 20th and into the 21st Century. So I was trying to commemorate his his life with the work that I did. I'm going to let you ask me another question.

Cliff Robinson: [00:26:03] Well, in that spirit, I guess I'd ask, why gates in particular? Why that form of a gate?

Tom Nussbaum: [00:26:09] Yeah, so that. So the gate I had, I had done another project which was not a gate, but kind of looked like a gate, and it was a big screen at a train station, and because there are these large gates at the entrance to Princeton University, which are at the top of Witherspoon Street, and the African American community, which live directly across the street, across Nassau Street from the university. For many, many, many years, were not allowed to go through those gates, and they were really close to the community that lived across the street from the university. And so this idea came up of it was partly my idea, but it was working with the committee as well, to create gates to the plaza named after Mr. Hinds that are kind of metaphorically permanently open. Gates open to everyone, gates that literally cannot be closed, and metaphorically are open and welcoming to all. So there was the basic format for the project there. And so then, within the design of the gates, I incorporated patterns and designs from textiles from the United States–mostly quilts. But you know, the US is a big melting pot of people and there are designs that you can trace back to the–in American quilts–that you can trace back to the European continent. And there are also designs in American quilts that you can trace back to the African countries where the slaves came from, and these in the history of American quilt making, these images have been mixed up. And you can find examples–if you look hard–you can find examples where these images have been mixed together. And so my concept was to represent, metaphorically, represent different cultures coming together with–by integrating these designs together. And so the gates do look like a quilt design, in essence. And they also contain a saying that Mr. Hinds was known to say often, which was, "it's always the right time to do the right thing," and this was a paraphrase that he had gotten from Martin Luther King, Jr and and he Mr. Hinds, in his life, apparently said this to a number of people

who have different important meetings and to his friends. And so I incorporated those words also into the design of the gates.

Cliff Robinson: [00:29:42] You spoke to some of the intentions or the ultimate takeaway of this installation. And I guess I'm thinking back to some of your comments on the interactions that you imagined in the space of the art on our third floor here in the library. Um, it strikes me that, like, the plaza is a very interactive space in Princeton, and so, you know, I know, as someone who has created a lot of public art, this is something you think about anytime you create something. I guess I think where I'm going with this is to ask after sort of how you understand your relationship with the audience in the space of Hinds Plaza itself.

Tom Nussbaum: [00:30:27] Yeah, yeah. Well, that's certainly a huge consideration when, when, when I do public artworks and there's–you have to observe how people do use the space, and how people move through the space. And when this, when we first started talking about this project, there was kind of in everyone's imagination, there were these–the gates were kind of larger than they are now. And one of the things that we wanted to consider was all the different uses of the plaza itself. So, in the–during the week, you know, it's kind of a quiet place where people come and they sit and they eat their lunch and they read and they kind of hang out. But often there's–in the evenings, there might be a dance event in the Plaza or a concert or a farmers' market, or, you know, any number of it's, it's, it's definitely a multi-use space. So in making these pieces, which the scale is pretty modest, and the reason for that is that I didn't want to block any sight lines as people walk into and use the space. I didn't want to block the

space itself so the shapes of the gates are curved to kind of fit in with the natural flow of the traffic and the way that the plaza is used and on different occasions. And they really are–the gates really are designed to fit within that space and allow all the different uses that the plaza is used for. And so, then also, it's important that, you know, the audience is this wide audience of everyone who's in downtown Princeton, and including, you know, the neighbors and the visitors and the students and library users, and you know, just everyone who comes to Princeton and so you want something that's accessible to people of all ages, and again, can be touched and be in a public space without fear of any kind of, you know, just open to all the interaction that can, you know, somebody comes and locks their bike on the thing that it's okay, it won't get hurt, you know, that kind of stuff. So all these are considerations for art in the public in the public space.

Cliff Robinson: [00:33:17] Looking towards the future, I wonder if you have any thoughts on, you know, what you hope for the art and the, you know, coming decades and so forth, you know, as we move forward as a community here. I mean, there are plans underway to rethink Hinds Plaza as a space. I, as I understand, the installations you have there are to be respected. And then, of course, here in the library, we have the long term to think about as well. You know, I don't think we're planning on changing the third floor anytime soon, but, you know, these are obviously questions that any artist has to reckon with, like, really anybody. But I just wonder what you think about the future of your art and what you've made for the town here.

Tom Nussbaum: [00:34:04] Yeah, it's, you know, things–what's the what's that old saying, the only thing constant is change. And so as an artist, you know, I realized that things change and needs change, and buildings change. And I, I, when I design public work, especially, it's really designed to outlast the buildings that they're in or on. And the idea being, you know, if someone can creatively, if the building gets turned out and a new building gets built, that someone can creatively incorporate the artwork into something new going forward and I had pieces out in the public space now for going on forty-five years. And they have a very good longevity. But I, I know that things change and artwork gets moved and hopefully respected. But you know, it's part of life.

Cliff Robinson: [00:35:26] That's great. Well, my last question is, for you, in your career as an artist, these projects that you did in Princeton, where would you place them? Do you have some sense of where they fit within your trajectory, or experience of moving along.

Tom Nussbaum: [00:35:42] Yeah. I mean, there I am very happy about both of these projects and, and I am actually right now in the middle of preparing for the Montclair Art Museum is doing a retrospective of my work, and, and it goes back over the decades, and each decade of work is represented as my work has changed over the years. And I think both of the projects in Princeton are really nice representations of the work that I was doing at that time, and also they've held up really well, kind of, visually and–you know as an artist sometimes you don't, you don't know what the longevity–you don't know until the time, till time goes by, how things look. You know, twenty years on and these two projects both I'm very proud of and very

pleased with the way they look today, all these years later. So I'm happy about them and they do represent two aspects of my work. One is the smaller studio work, which is inside the library, and the other is the public work, which is very much involved in working with communities and working together with a group of people to solve problems and create something that's a benefit for a larger public community. So I'm happy about them.

Cliff Robinson: [00:37:34] That's great. Did you have anything else you wanted to share for the record here? Or any other thoughts come to mind?

Tom Nussbaum: [00:37:43] No, I think it's good. I mean, I think we're good. I appreciate, I appreciate this time to speak about the work. And I hope that, I hope some, some of what I said makes some kind of sense.

Cliff Robinson: [00:38:01] Yeah, yeah, definitely it does. All right, well, thank you very much. Tom, thanks for taking the time to do this interview, and thank you for what you've given to Princeton.

Tom Nussbaum: [00:38:13] Thanks, Cliff, and thank you for your great questions. I really, really appreciate what you're doing here, and your oral project is fantastic. I think it's a great thing to do.

Cliff Robinson: [00:38:27] Thank you.

Tom Nussbaum: [00:38:28] Carry on. Yeah.

Cliff Robinson: [00:38:30] We'll move forward. But for now, this is the end of the recording.

Tom Nussbaum: [00:38:33] Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]