A CONVERSATION WITH

JAMES SURLS

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Carolyn Farb: James, I've had the pleasure of visiting in your studio in Splendora. It was magical. As I reflect on your work, I am struck by the powerful imagery from nature. Did your upbringing in East Texas awaken a love of nature?

James Surls: Yes, where kids grow up inherently sets their direction.

I grew up on a farm. I played on creek banks and in the woods, and I conjured playmates from nature. I played games like wild horse. If you are a horse, you get to run free. I actually had a very free childhood.

CF: Were your parents a major influence in your art?

JS: My mother is an incredibly creative person to this day. I credit her with giving me my creative energy. I credit my dad with my ability to process, to exercise and to bring something to completion.

CF: Which artists speak to you?

JS: My favorite artist is Joseph Cornell.

CF: What is it about Cornell that you like?

JS: He could put our universe in a hat box and create a solar system by dropping a blue marble in a shot glass. His was not just visual aesthetics, but psychological aesthetics. I absolutely love Frida Kahlo's art. It's psychologically complicated because her life was psychologically complicated. It speaks very truthfully of a particular moment in time. Art is supposed to tell you the truth.

CF: What do you think was her glory?

JS: That she actually lived a life as painful as it was.

CF: If you were organizing a dinner of artists, whom would you invite?

JS: I would invite some poets – Robert Creeley, William Wordsworth and Walt Whitman. Also my daughter, Ruby, my artist friends, Charmaine Locke and John Alexander, and then some science guys and Orozco, the Mexican muralist. I saw a painting in Guadalajara that he had done called Burning Man. As a young artist in my early twenties, that unbelievable painting changed my life.

CF: Describe Burning Man.

JS: It was not about a man on fire in a destructive way, but rather about energy being released, the phenomenon of being human and having the ability to create and express. In 1963, as I was looking up at the painting, I remember being totally engulfed by its glorious impact.
CF: What is the role of the artist as you see it?
JS: One of a seer, a visionary. A person in a shamanistic sense goes on a particular journey, comes back and speaks of the journey saying, “Here is where I have been, and here is what I saw.”
CF: Do you create art everyday?
JS: I either draw, write or sculpt every day. I do something that keeps it moving forward. I truly love what I do. If people love doing what they do on a daily basis, then they are quite willing to put in long hours—it literally defines their lives.
CF: You have given wings to many young artists. Why?
JS: I’ll tell you my thinking about teaching. You cannot take credit for what someone becomes. What you can do is set up an environment...a moment through which those people can pass.
CF: Your stream-of-consciousness drawings and words seem autobiographical. Are they?
JS: Art is a fragment of an artist’s life, but it is complete in and of itself. Each sculpture is complete, each drawing complete; however, they really only tell about a very short and brief moment. When I do an exhibition, it will represent a series of fragments in my life that you have to look at in a total way.
CF: Your work is in many prominent museums from the Guggenheim to the Meadows Museum at SMU. Share with our readers your excitement about the upcoming 20-year retrospective of your work at the Blaffer Gallery in Houston.
JS: It certainly is a pinnacle, and I’m extremely honored that someone thinks that this particular block of time out of my life is important enough to isolate within a historical context. My consideration has to do with the particular person who wants to do it—Terrie Sultan, the director of the Blaffer Gallery at the University of Houston. It’s a great honor for an artist to have someone of Terrie’s caliber bring that into a focused reality.
CF: Your magnificent Eye Flower sculpture in Los Angeles, which was commissioned by developer Mark Siffin, stands tall out in West Hollywood. When you see it blazing in the sky, how does it make you feel?
JS: Things like that always make artists feel good. It is one of those glory moments.
CF: Well, here’s to more glory moments.