

**GREENWICH  
VILLAGE SOCIETY  
FOR HISTORIC  
PRESERVATION**

**VILLAGE  
PRESERVATION**

**VILLAGE PRESERVATION  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

Oral History Interview  
CHRISTINA MAILE

By Sarah Dzedzic  
New York, NY  
October 26, 2021



Christina Maile at Westbeth, Photo by Joseph Holmes

## Quotes from Oral History Interview with Christina Maile

### Sound-bite

“Okay, I’m Christina Maile. I’m a printmaker living at Westbeth Artists Housing. I’ve had a varied career in the arts, thanks to affordable housing here. I’ve lived in Westbeth for almost fifty years... First, I started out just doing landscape, so I would do monoprints of trees and water. And then that’s when I began to remember all of these stories that my parents had told about living a much different life—a life that incorporated the unseen as well as the seen, spirits and ghosts. Superstitions have a bad connotation, but just connections between how your actions influence other things and how your life proceeds from that.

So I began to remember these stories, and the context of those stories was also the control that British colonialism and British imperialism had on both those islands and how it thwarted a lot of the culture and language of the place. And also made people kind of deny who they were, in favor of being who they were supposed to be, in terms of this structure that the colonialism brought to those islands. That’s how I began in investigating in my own ancestry.”

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### Additional Quotes

“And then some artists, we had a gallery. I’m not sure how the gallery came about but people began organizing shows. My husband at the time was a painter. I don’t know how they picked themselves but somebody came by and looked at his work and said, ‘Oh, yes, you should be part of the painting show.’ It was really, everybody was in—that’s the word—they were inventing things, they were inventing this community. It answered a lot of needs, and it wasn’t planned. That’s what was so amazing. People will just say, ‘Oh, you know, I need this, maybe someone else needs this as well.’

That’s how the playwright group began sort of in that way as well... And there was a sculpture studio, so the sculptors got together and they had this fantastic studio. The photographer’s got together, and the building had provided dark rooms so there were dark rooms. And there was so much optimism. And, because the rent was so affordable, there wasn’t this burden that you had to have a full-time job in order to be an artist. You could have a succession of part-time jobs and actually practice your work—practice your discipline.

And there were other—I’m trying to think—the security group, the parking group, the children’s group. There was one guy who moved out of Westbeth and he became part of a farm co-op and he would come—in the early 1970s—he would come every week and try to do a green market and he would sell—but no one was interested so he gave up. Nobody was interested in vegetables at the time.” (Maile p. 12–13)

“...the first meeting, I remember, it was mostly men, and then the group eventually became the Playwrights Feminist Collective... There was a whole discussion over two or three meetings. And it turned out that the men really had thought that we would produce his play, or his play, or that it would be a way for the plays to be produced. And it wasn't—we weren't against that but we were but this group, under Dolores, we were trying to allow—I mean, that's the feeling of community—to allow everybody to have a voice in this production. It wound up that only the women stayed and, and eventually, as we talked about what this evening of writing would be, it coalesced into—at the time it was called Women's Lib—into this feminist-oriented group, where the sketches and plays talked about the things that we had gone through as women in the workplace, and in theater, and family, everything. That's how that started. Very casually, and yet, underneath, there probably was his burgeoning need that we all felt...

We would then put together these sketches about moments where we felt, as women, the kind of oppression and demeaning and humiliating things that happen. And because we were also, I think, just young and adventurous, we didn't think—I think we also wanted it not to hit people over the head. People wrote serious things—there were some people that wrote very, very serious sketches that were wonderful. And then others, like myself and others, wrote much more kind of absurdist—not funny—but absurdist kind of situations. There were real-life sketches and sketches. They both spoke to the same kind of dilemma and hardship as women growing up but some took a very absurdist kind of view and others took a more realistic view.

We did it for—I think we were together four or five years. And then we began to believe our own [laughs] philosophy. So the group eventually disbanded... But we broke our own barriers in a sense by having this group.” (Maile p. 14–15)

“I sound like such a dilettante, just going from one thing to another, just like a stray leaf that just falls whatever it falls and suddenly I'm doing something else. But, in effect, really, I think, I think I've always been who I am, it's just sometimes you just don't know who you are until you just find yourself in these experiences and you respond to it. It's like, you, yourself, are a vehicle of photosynthesis. Every experience translates into something that you didn't know you didn't have inside of you but it suddenly energizes you like light and water energizes the plant. I think we're all, in effect—we're processing a lot of our experiences, and some, like me, who is both courageous and afraid, will take advantage of. So anyway! What I'm saying is that it's not like a suddenly new thing.” (Maile p. 21–22)

“...when my first husband and I moved back to New York, we lived in—one, two, three, four—we moved every year! In the five years we were here, I think we moved four times. And then we moved into Westbeth, and then, although he left, then I wound up staying fifty years it was like a caprice that lasted forever. So stable, affordable housing—not just for artists, but for everyone—I think is the single most—other than health insurance—is the single most important

issue. The reason why I think Westbeth is so important, just because the arts are important to human life, and how we see the world.

But as an artist, I was able to—while having to still raise kids and have a full-time job, the idea that I didn't have to devote all of my earnings to rent and that there was no threat of eviction—it is like a paradise. Even though there's problems with the building and plumbing and heating, it's—I'm speechless because I'm not quite sure exactly how to describe the feeling of security and happiness that living in this building has brought not only to me but to seeing the importance of how art—that's what's really important—it's not just my work that is important. It's the work of well-known and less well-known artists who live here, who do these extraordinary things with their minds and their hands in creating—sometimes you walk into their apartments and you cannot believe, looking at them, that they could do such things!

And once everyone moves in, it's very rare to move out because it's like moving out of the Garden of Eden. It fulfills so many things about being an artist, and also about being an outsider—I think a lot of artists feel kind of like they're outside of society and outside of the normal common communication, the normal goals and wishes that most people have. In this place, all these outsiders have found a community. Whether they join it or not, there's a feeling that they can think of creating work.” (Maile p. 30)

## Summary of Oral History Interview with Christina Maile

Christina Maile was raised in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn by parents of Malaysian and Trinidadian descent, who lived amidst British colonial rule before settling in the U.S. At home, she experienced elements of these cultural backgrounds, though her parents were keen to appear assimilated to anyone outside the family. She attended school in her neighborhood, which she never left until she moved to the outskirts of the Detroit metropolitan area to attend college at Oakland University, which she was drawn after seeing an image of its library on a college flyer.

At Oakland University, Maile was excited to study history, a subject she says was lacking from her Catholic school education. She also met and befriended a group of students who were part of the art department, which began her interest in art. There she also met Tom Maile, her first husband, who was a painter and art historian; together, they moved back to New York City and got a tip to apply to then-new Westbeth Artists Housing.

Maile describes the early days of living in Westbeth as a time when tenants were encouraged to customize their living spaces, create their own interest-based groups, and invent whatever their growing community needed. She describes groups for painters, playwrights, sculptors, photographers and printmakers, as well as parents and car owners. A founding member of the Playwrights Feminist Collective in the early 1970s, Maile describes how she and others were empowered to launch careers as a result of the hardships and aspirations they articulated in their plays. This transition was further enabled by the affordability of their housing and communal child care.

Maile earned a degree in urban landscape architecture from City College, eventually working for the Parks Department as an engineer ensuring that design plans worked with the features and constraints of each site. She also co-designed a children's AIDS garden with her second husband, Parviz Mohassel.

Since retiring, she has remained at Westbeth, and spent the last two decades establishing herself as a fine artist. She is a self-taught printmaker—inspired by her discovery of an inactive printmaking studio at Westbeth—and has taken painting lessons from Dan Rice, who was part of the development Abstract Expressionism at Black Mountain College. Her recent work explores her ancestry, landscapes, and gender.

Compiled by Sarah Dziejic

## **General Interview Notes**

This is a transcription of an Oral History that was conducted by Village Preservation.

The Village Preservation Oral History Project includes a collection of interviews with individuals involved in local businesses, culture, and preservation, to gather stories, observations, and insights concerning the changing Greenwich Village. These interviews elucidate the personal resonances of the neighborhood within the biographies of key individuals, and illustrate the evolving neighborhood.

Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record.

The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange.

The views expressed by the contributor(s) are solely those of the contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or endorsement of our organization.

THANK YOU

## Oral History Interview Transcript

**Dziedzic:** Today is October 26, 2021. And this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Christina Maile for the Village Preservation Oral History Project, and we're conducting this interview remotely, and connecting via video call.

Before we begin, I'd like to start with a living land acknowledgement. Today, I'm on the traditional lands of the Lenape people, who were dispossessed from this land, and now live throughout the U.S. and Canada in diaspora. And we express gratitude to the Lenape for their stewardship of this land, for contributing to its geography and ecology, and for the ongoing use of their language as place names. We also acknowledge the present day demands of the Lenape community to be given a place at the table of power in New York City, and to share their traditional knowledge and practices in the leadership of the city.

Christina, can you, say your name and give yourself a brief introduction?

**Maile:** Okay, I'm Christina Maile. I'm a printmaker living at Westbeth Artists Housing. I've had a varied career in the arts, thanks to affordable housing here. And I think that sometimes longevity makes other people think you know a lot more than you do! [laughs] I've lived in Westbeth for almost fifty years. And so I'm not sure exactly what I know. But I'll let you in on it!

**Dziedzic:** Thank you. And I'd like to ask if you'd like to describe any of your lineages or ancestors that you'd like to bring into the interview space?

**Maile:** Yes, I would, because a lot of it, recently, or in the last ten years, have begun to influence the art that I've been making. My father was a Dayak tribesman from what is now called Sabah—what was originally called British North Borneo. And so he came from a pretty nice natural landscape that included a lot of cultural things that may not be fully accepted today—he came from a tribe of headhunters. And the reason why he wound up in America was that, when the British came, they outlawed headhunting. And so he joined, actually, the British Merchant Marine, and eventually wound up in the U.S.



And my mother came from the West Indies, from Trinidad. And I think it was a broken love affair of my grandmother that prompted her to leave with her two children, and come to the U.S. It's a typical story that we should be celebrating—how people come from various backgrounds and cultures and seed the culture of America. So anyway, their background is much different than then what you normally come across. And when I was growing up, I didn't really appreciate a lot of it. My father tried to teach us his language, which was a kind of a dialect called Dusun. And, you know, we never really paid attention to it, because we were all so—including my father—so interested in becoming acclimated as Americans, which was a very, as it turns out, not such a good thing.

But at the time, they wanted to be—my father, my mother, grandmother, all these people that came—wanted to be accepted. And that was the way, was to kind of deny the culture. But they did try to tell us things. So there was a lot of stories about growing up in the West Indies and growing up in Sabah, which eventually has come into my artwork, especially as it deals with colonialism and landscape.

**Maile:** Can you tell me a little bit about where you grew up? And I guess the access that you had to different people, what the neighborhood was like, who your neighbors were. [00:04:58]

**Maile:** I grew up in Bed-Stuy—Bedford-Stuyvesant—in Brooklyn. And my father actually made a pretty good living on the British Merchant Marine. So they were able to buy a brownstone on Lexington Avenue, but they couldn't afford just to have it for themselves. So me and my eventually six brothers and sisters lived on the ground floor. And then we had a boarder, on the second floor.

The neighborhood was predominantly Black, was totally Black. And it was kind of a rough neighborhood. But I didn't know it was rough. I thought that was the way everyone kind of lived—in sort of fear and courage. [laughs] This mixture. When you went outside, we had to be courageous and appear to be, although, inside, afraid. But I thought that kind of emotional balancing act was actually pretty good for me, growing up and in my later life. It's always good to be courageous and afraid at the same time.

But what was interesting about growing up is that my grandmother, who lived with us her entire life, had inherited a lot of the British attitudes towards race. So she wasn't very

comfortable with American Blacks. And I think she felt herself more educated and, you know, a little further up on the social scale. And so she was kind of a little bit denigrating—not like totally—maybe just in the intimacy of our family life. She belonged to a really well-regarded church and she was very, very active in a lot of social causes back then.

My father didn't like my grandmother, so that was just the way it went [laughs]. So he didn't really pay attention—I mean, he had his own group of friends who were also on the ship. So their social life was friends of my mother's and grandmother's from the church, and friends of my father's from being in the British Merchant Marine, who were all from basically the same area where they came from.

**Dziedzic:** And I know you said the goal at the time was assimilation. How did your family identify culturally, racially, demographically?

**Maile:** My father—you know, I think for a lot of men in that time, identified, basically with sports, so he was a fan of baseball. And he didn't talk too much. He talked about his family life and he was very close to a lot of his friends. We would constantly be having Malaysian—you know, curry. When he was home, he did all of the cooking. He cooked a lot of rice curry and fish curry, and beef curry—we basically had curry.

And then when he went on the ship, then my grandmother, who was never used to American cooking, would cook West Indian stuff, like banana fritters and cou-cou, and—just various names for food. And whenever she had to cook anything that she didn't know—like, I don't know, green beans—she would cook them for hours because she was unsure about the safety of the vegetables you would get in American supermarkets. She did shop at West Indian markets and we would have to take a bus and buy avocados and mangoes and bananas—bananas back then were not as available as they are now.

On the inside, they identified with the cultural background, but on the outside, they were—it was like living in a pretend world because we were on welfare, I think, for a long time. So every time the inspector came, we had to hide anything we had bought new, for one, and then my grandmother, they had to lie about whether they had a job or not. At the same time there was this distrust of government, but really wanting to be invisible by being visible, by being seen as just a regular person, a regular who hadn't emigrated but has always been there. [00:10:11]

**Dziedzic:** That sounds so difficult.

**Maile:** No, it's not if you're used to it. It's not difficult at all. And the idea of having a persona that you present to the world has influenced how I—how any artist, actually—does their work. There's a bridge that you don't really cross except in terms of imagination. They did this all the time.

And in fact, they spoke in—I grew up speaking English backwards. Because, as I said, there was a tension between my grandmother and my parents—rather, my father—and so my father spoke in the Dusun language with his friends. And my grandmother and mother, in order so that he wouldn't understand what they were saying, just began speaking English—they just used the words backwards. And he never caught on! [laughs]

And I never caught on until I was like, twelve or thirteen years old because I was, you know, speaking English backwards inside the house, and then outside just regular. I never knew there was a connection. And, yes, in this way, if they were shopping and my grandmother and mother were arguing about a price, nobody would know because they were arguing about it in this backwards language. I only discovered it just, you know, when I was, like, twelve or thirteen. And my grandmother and mother were arguing about somebody. And eventually, it suddenly clicked that it was all just backwards English.

**Dziedzic:** Wow. What was your relationship like to the rest of the city as you were a young woman? When did you start traveling around to different neighborhoods?

**Maile:** Hardly ever! My parents lied about where I lived so I could get into parochial school, grammar school. It was within the neighborhood, it was just kind of an artificial line. And so I went there. And then when I went to high school, I went to a catholic high school in downtown Brooklyn. But I didn't have that many friends because I was kind of embarrassed by all the kids and the noise and, just how close everyone was living. And I never invited anyone over to my house. And because I was in that way very shy, I never got to visit any anyone else's house. I was really not familiar with any part except for Bedford-Stuyvesant, and then every now and

then I was—in high school, I think I had a job somewhere, but it was within the neighborhood. I had actually never left the neighborhood until I basically ran away to college.

**Dziedzic:** Can you tell me about that?

**Maile:** Oh, running away to—well, so I won a Regents scholarship in high school, and that allowed you to go tuition-free in any college. But I was expected to go to St. Joseph’s College, which was the sister-institution of my high school. And one day I got this flyer from this new college in Michigan called Oakland University. And it was just a flyer showing a library and people just relaxing and some classrooms. And the flyer had a letter—apparently, I was on this Regents scholarship list and this new college was just looking for people to enroll, and they offered me a partial scholarship.

But back then, the Regents scholarship, you could not use it in any school outside of New York. But it was suddenly a—I had wanted so much to get away from my life in Brooklyn that I went to Williamsburg Bank to get a student loan. I told them that my parents didn’t speak English and that I would just take all the loan documents and bring them back. And so I did. I went home, I rifled through my parents’ stuff, got all their—I don’t know, rent receipts, deeds, paystubs. And I filled it out and I forged their signatures. I brought it back and I got the student loan. I didn’t tell my parents that I had gotten this loan and that I had enrolled [laughs] in this college in Michigan.

And so it was like a couple of days before—because they expect me to get a job, so I actually had gotten a job. And my parents were really excited because I would be contributing to the family budget. And that’s when I told them that I was leaving for Michigan, and that I had packed my bag. And the only reason I told them was because I had planned for everything but I couldn’t figure out a way to get from my house to the airport. Because at that time, I didn’t know how to do a cab. And I couldn’t figure out the subway, there was no subway. And so that’s when I revealed that I had gotten this college, and it was free, they didn’t have to pay for anything, but that I needed a ride to the airport. And my mother was totally upset and my father was upset and they were yelling and arguing. But because of various family tensions, my father, who very rarely agreed with my mother, realized that he was agreeing with her and stepped back and said, “No, she could go, why not?” And so he drove me to the airport and gave me \$40! [16:58]

**Maile:** What was it like to arrive in Michigan?

**Maile:** It was like walking into a TV set. People had regular houses and they played bridge and they had a lamp in the window. It was like a movie. I couldn't believe it. What was funny was everyone thought I was very sophisticated because I was from New York. And everyone kept asking me where *West Side Story* was filmed. And, you know, I had no idea.

But the thing was, in the flyer, they just showed people in the summer! And so I didn't know that Michigan could get really cold. But I didn't—because I had this persona of being sophisticated, I didn't tell anyone that I was cold. And for the majority of the winter, I went without a winter coat, saying, “Everybody in New York, nobody wears a coat.” [laughs] You have to understand, this is before the internet, before a lot of things. And yes, people did believe me. And then for like a week everyone imitated me not wearing a coat [laughs].

Anyway, but what was so great, I had three books growing up. I had books in school, but I didn't know anything about a library, for some reason, I had no idea there was a public library. So I used to shoplift books, when I was growing up. I would go to the Five & Dime, and they would have a rack and I would pick, like, the thickest books that I could get away with. But that was the thing in the flyer—on the flyer, they showed this library with stacks of books. And in the Catholic school, you just have books about missionaries and saints. And so this was so amazing to me. That's actually why I went to Oakland, was because of the picture of a library.

I forgot your question. [laughs] What was your question?

**Dziedzic:** Just what it was like when you arrived.

**Maile:** That was it, yes. Yes, it was like two different worlds clashing. And once again, my persona now was—instead of being courageous and afraid—was being this sophisticated New Yorker who knew about all these things. And if I didn't know it, I would just make it up. And I got into with a group of friends and we would drive back to New York for holidays. And so, I remember the first time we crossed over the bridge and everyone kept asking me, truly, once again, where *West Side Story* was. They wanted to see the playground, and I could point to like any random playground and say, yes, that's where it happened. And that's the other street where

they ran down the block [laughs]. You have to you have to remember, it was really before the internet before a lot of easily accessed information. [20:14]

**Dziedzic:** Absolutely. And so what drew you in terms of subjects and reading material when you were there?

**Maile:** It was history, which, I really—because in Catholic school, they only taught you just this one part of anything that happened. And it was mostly Western European, and mostly Catholic-oriented. And to discover there was this other entire world that had been missing from my education—so that’s why I wound up studying history. And I wound up studying Russian medieval history, mainly because it had an interesting mixture of really barbaric savagery coupled with fantastic—and I think this is probably partly due to my Catholic education—the Byzantine icons and of all that artwork, I found so amazing. That combination of violence, religion, and—yes, that confluence. So yes, I got into that.

And then I got into—just by accident because I was considered cool—me, who had never had a date, never had a party, never had anything to do with anything, suddenly was part of this really cool clique of people who were part of the art department. And so it was like a transformation. And that’s how I became interested in art. Just because I was this cool New Yorker.

**Dziedzic:** What were some of the artists that you remember—contemporary artists—that you were interested in and inspired by?

**Maile:** Back then, or now?

**Dziedzic:** Back then.

**Maile:** Oh, back then? Well, back then. It was still all Abstract Expressionists. All the teachers, the studio teachers, were all into that kind of spontaneous-gestural thing. And when Pop Art came, it was as if Satan had landed [laughs]. And so there were all these big, long discussions far

into the night about Pop Art—that it wasn't real—and Abstract Expressionism. That got me interested in art.

But at the same time, there was a professor there. Professor Galloway, who was, like, the perfect embodiment of a college professor, and he had written a book about—they called it primitive art back then—but it was all African sculptures. And that was so mind-blowing—much more mind-blowing than Abstract Expressionism or Pop Art—that there was a whole arena of how people perceived themselves within the landscape, perceived animals' spirits, and were able to express them in these just entralling and totally tactile form that showed both the exterior and the interior at the same time.

**Maile:** And how did you end up at Westbeth? Or, I guess I should ask first, how did you end up coming back to New York?

**Maile:** Well, as you know, back then, I either had to get a job or get married, you know, these were the things that were, back then—you see, really, it's been so long since I grew up. I feel like I'm speaking from this far-distance past like I lived in ancient times or prehistoric times. I wound up marrying [Tom Maile], one of the cool art kids in college and he was a painter, so that's how. He was a painter. He was also an art historian. The reason why we moved back to New York was because he was getting his Master's at Columbia.

But back then, the cousin of one of the people that everyone hung around with was Tod Williams, who's now a pretty well-known architect—he was the cousin of one of our best friends. And when we moved back, we were still friendly with him and his wife. And he's the one that told us about Westbeth and that we should apply. [25:17]

**Dziedzic:** And did you reignite your relationship with your family when you came back to New York?

**Maile:** Well, I had no choice [laughs] because now I was this cool college graduate. I mean, it wasn't like a terrible—it was mostly the environment. It wasn't them, themselves. It was just, you know, poverty is insidious. It's not just the lack of things. It's the lack of how to be generous in both your emotions and curiosity because you're so focused on surviving that other means of

expression get diminished. And so by the time I moved back, my father had gotten a really nice job, a civil service kind of job, and my mother had gotten something else. And they were much more comfortable. And my sisters and brothers were still running around. Although one of my sisters—you know, as I said, we grew up in a really tough neighborhood and she wasn't as tough as my other brothers and sisters, and so she became addicted to drugs and she died early. But otherwise—

**Dziedzic:** I'm sorry to hear that.

**Dziedzic:** Yes, she was interesting because I think she closely understood the culture where my father came from. I still have it. When she was eleven or twelve, she took a piece of a banister and carved out—I don't know where—I knew she had never seen—she was a year younger than me, so we were pretty close—and she had carved out a figure of a god. It was like one of those pieces I'd seen in the African art class I took years later. And she must have been channeling something because she just carved it. It was so amazing. She was extremely artistic. But she—that was the only thing I have of hers. I think everything else she just kind of let go of.

**Maile:** And what was Westbeth like, in the early days?

**Maile:** Well, what was interesting about Westbeth on the outside was that it was so dangerous. It was a part of New York that was the meat markets. There was a lot of sexual activity with prostitutes and truck drivers. And then there was a gay subculture. There were a lot of people doing what nowadays is not, but back then was considered criminal, illegal, and immoral. Part of the darkness of that neighborhood was the darkness of how other people, and especially how the police, viewed those activities.

There was a men's house of detention about two or three blocks away that, every now and then, you would hear a siren go off if someone escaped or something. And there were not that many streetlights. And so during the day, cab drivers wouldn't know where Bethune Street was. And it was great! I mean, it reminded me a little of my growing up because you just never knew what was going to happen.



And in fact, at that time, the tenants of Westbeth, who really consider themselves very much like pioneers, put together their own security team. Residents volunteered and they would go around the block and make sure that nobody was on the premises that should not be. Sometimes they would circumnavigate the hallways. And there was crime—muggings and then serious crimes as well.

I think at one point—I'm just giving you the outside, what it meant, what it felt like. I'll tell you the other part later. But I remember once—one of the tenants, residents, a woman brought home a guy from a bar and he wouldn't go, she couldn't get rid of him. So she called up the Westbeth resident security guards and so they came knocking on the door. It was great. I mean, that she could call them—that's how wonderful the community immediately banded together. But part of that was because of the dangerous surroundings. They knocked on the door, she let them in. It turned out that the guy she couldn't get rid of was an actor. And the two other guys were actors too and they knew each other. What happened was that she wound up having three guys there just talking about acting and [laughs]—she went to bed or something, but you know, eventually they left but it was kind of funny.

But anyways—moving in. It was brand new, the ceilings were so white, the walls were white, there was brand new appliances, the windows were so big. And the hallways were, as they still are, all these labyrinth things and you could peek into anybody's—there were a lot of empty apartments because I was actually one of the first wave of people to move in, so you could just wander and you could almost pick your apartment. Because there were so many empty ones, I think they, in the beginning, had a little bit of trouble getting people because it was so far removed from anybody's consciousness. And for a while there was a lot of empty apartments. So people—one person moved in and decided he didn't like his apartment and he just moved into the one next door. And only a couple weeks later did he go down to management and tell them that he had moved from one apartment to another.

The other part that was so great was that you could do anything you wanted. People built the walls, they build loft beds—they didn't have to ask anybody what to do because the whole description of artists housing was interpreted as creative housing, so you didn't have to ask anybody what you could do with your apartment. Nowadays, unfortunately, you have to, but back then, you could build a second bathroom, tear up your walls, some people did something with their staircases—they built a third level somehow. It was so much fun to see all this wood

coming in, and wallboard, and it was equally crowded with all of these building materials as it was with paintings and sculptures and these elevators because everybody was doing something—either they were painting and sculpting, or they work on whatever, re-doing their apartment again and again. Every time someone had a new baby or someone had someone stay over, some people turned their apartments into kind of like Airbnb's and they'd divide up even more cubicles. This was not allowed at all. But that was the feeling of spontaneity and freedom you had when you moved in, that you were given a blank page. [33:51]

**Dziedzic:** And can you talk about some of the—I mean, when I've heard of artists talk about living in New York at this time, they might be taking that approach to totally abandoned lofts in other parts of downtown or in SoHo. So can you talk a little bit more—like in addition to the security force—what were the other elements of support and the things that you had as a tenant that maybe a lot of artists were not used to at the time.

**Maile:** I think, because the exterior of the neighborhood was still a little menacing—even though there was a supermarket, two supermarkets not too far away—there tended to be much more need for community. There was a children's group because we all moved in when we were really young, and all our kids were young (including my kids, Julian Maile and Ethan Maile).<sup>1</sup> So all these groups arose. And one of them was the children's group, where we would take turns taking care of like ten, twelve kids in some basement area. We would just access a basement area and turn it into a children's area. That would give the other mothers a chance to work or to do their art, to do dance, to choreograph dance—there were a lot of women dancers who were mothers as well. Yes, a lot of the painters tended to be male. I don't know why, but anyway, that was then. A lot of writers who were mothers would then have a chance to write. That was great.

That was, like, spontaneous, and then it had rules. It was fantastic. I mean, I had never heard of this kind of children's co-op, where you could just drop your kid off, and to a place in

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<sup>1</sup> In the early '70s, Westbeth was filled with children. The apartments were loft style so parents had to build loft beds and rooms in clever ways. I worked as a carpenter in those days and was constantly building new versions of loft beds for my kids, Julian and Ethan, too. Since at least one of the parents worked at home, kids were always running down the hallways hearing music coming out of apartment doors, playing elevator tag while sharing an elevator with someone carrying a painting, or visiting their friends' apartments where someone was always busy doing creative work. Every apartment was filled with art and people talking about their art, and I think a lot of the kids thought that was very normal. Many of the kids grew up to be artists, and many of them too decided they wanted more financial security in their lives. Yet even those kids, after they were grown up, always made sure their own kids had art in their lives.

the basement. And pick him up, if you remembered, three or four hours later. [laughs] And then there was a parking group that spontaneously happened—I mean, there’s—you want to hear this?

**Dziedzic:** [indicates yes]

**Maile:** The place along the river, all the piers and warehouses had been abandoned or demolished. They were these strips where, now, Hudson River Park is, that were not claimed by anyone. So there was a woman in Westbeth who decided to form a parking group. And she just took over a whole area of that and she sold little tickets [laughs]. I think she must have gotten some kind of okay from the police department, I’m not sure. But anyway, they drew lines, and we had this parking—we could park for thirty dollars a year, and you got this little green ticket that said “W” on it. The only bad thing was that people occasionally would break in.

And because it was across—you know, the West Side Highway was still up so there was a very visual buffer between what you can see, and so sometimes, you’d cross the street and you’d find someone had been—would break into your car, not to take anything, but just either to have sex or eat Chinese food. One time I got into my car—I was working then so I needed the car. So I got in my car and there was like all these Chinese food containers that they had left on the seats.

I remember once I was going to work, so I got into my car, and I was going to work and I had to take a different route. I wound up along West Street, and I wound up passing the parking area. And I looked at my space, and I said, “Oh my god, now they’ve stolen my car!” But I was driving my car, it was just [laughs] I’d been so used to things happening that my first thought was someone had stolen my car! Anyway, so that was the Parking Association.

And then some artists, we had a gallery. I’m not sure how the gallery came about but people began organizing shows. My husband at the time was a painter. I don’t know how they picked themselves but somebody came by and looked at his work and said, “Oh, yes, you should be part of the painting show.” It was really, everybody was in—that’s the word—they were inventing things, they were inventing this community. It answered a lot of needs, and it wasn’t planned. That’s what was so amazing. People will just say, “Oh, you know, I need this, maybe someone else needs this as well.”

That's how the playwright group began sort of in that way as well. In the beginning, when you first moved in, the managements told us that it would be good if you would get together with people in your discipline, and so you get to know them. They were much more involved in making sure that the disparate people who came from all over could—they were encouraged to find each other. And at the time, because there was so much space in the building to do anything. You know, to put on shows, put on exhibits. That's how the playwriting group got started. And I had written a couple of plays in college—I didn't finish at Oakland, I wound up finishing at Hunter College. At Hunter College, I was in the history department but I had to take an elective so I took a playwriting class. And so I wrote a couple of plays and one of them got produced in Staten Island. That's how I could call myself a playwright [laughs] because I had one summer tour of a play. I was listed as a playwright so that's how I got invited to this group, this playwriting group.

And there was a sculpture studio, so the sculptors got together and they had this fantastic studio. The photographers got together, and the building had provided dark rooms so there were dark rooms. And there was so much optimism. And, because the rent was so affordable, there wasn't this burden that you had to have a full-time job in order to be an artist. You could have a succession of part-time jobs and actually practice your work—practice your discipline.

And there were other—I'm trying to think—the security group, the parking group, the children's group. There was one guy who moved out of Westbeth and he became part of a farm co-op and he would come—in the early 1970s—he would come every week and try to do a green market and he would sell—but no one was interested so he gave up. Nobody was interested in vegetables at the time. [41:59]

**Dziedzic:** Just the Chinese food? [laughs]

**Maile:** Just the Chinese food [laughs]. I know, it was so strange because they didn't do anything. They didn't steal the battery. They didn't steal the cigarette lighter. They just ate.

**Dziedzic:** Yeah, sometimes you just need a space!

**Maile:** Out of the rain. I wonder if they even had it delivered, like, you know, the third car on the right across from Bank Street.

**Dziedzic:** [Laughs] Yes!

I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about—I had read either a previous interview or something that you had written about how the playwrights came together, that it wasn't intentionally a feminist group from the get-go.

**Maile:** No, no, it was—it is funny because the first meeting, I remember, it was mostly men, and then the group eventually became the Playwrights Feminist Collective. And the male playwrights—so Dolores Walker, who still lives here called the meeting. She's this naturally organized person, like a lot of people who started these groups. They were naturally organized, they saw a need, they felt that they were part of this community, they wanted this community to grow, and so they would actively involve people in putting together what was demanded. And so she's the one that called this meeting, and all these people showed up, all these playwrights.

There was a whole discussion over two or three meetings. And it turned out that the men really had thought that we would produce his play, or his play, or that it would be a way for the plays to be produced. And it wasn't—we weren't against that but we were but this group, under Dolores, we were trying to allow—I mean, that's the feeling of community—to allow everybody to have a voice in this production. It wound up that only the women stayed and, and eventually, as we talked about what this evening of writing would be, it coalesced into—at the time it was called Women's Lib—into this feminist-oriented group, where the sketches and plays talked about the things that we had gone through as women in the workplace, and in theater, and family, everything. That's how that started. Very casually, and yet, underneath, there probably was his burgeoning need that we all felt.

**Dziedzic:** And what did that kind of space provide for other women in the group and for you?  
[45:14]

**Maile:** I think what it did was that it—whenever you have a group, you really do need someone who's strong and can see things ahead of time and likes to give orders [laughs]—this treasure of

Dolores because back then, she would put notes under everybody's doors, phone calls. She really was so active and she did some really good writing. And so it was a safe place to start talking about these issues, not in a like an overtly political way because we were not a political group. We were talking about our normal daily lives and being creative people.

We would then put together these sketches about moments where we felt, as women, the kind of oppression and demeaning and humiliating things that happen. And because we were also, I think, just young and adventurous, we didn't think—I think we also wanted it not to hit people over the head. People wrote serious things—there were some people that wrote very, very serious sketches that were wonderful. And then others, like myself and others, wrote much more kind of absurdist—not funny—but absurdist kind of situations. There were real-life sketches and sketches. They both spoke to the same kind of dilemma and hardship as women growing up but some took a very absurdist kind of view and others took a more realistic view.

It was a nice blend of an evening, when we produced these productions, which made them really popular, because then we added music. We, unlike other feminist theatrical groups, we allowed men to be on stage, but we really made an effort—and I think this is on the Wikipedia page—we really made an effort to have all of the backstage people, the set designers, lighting people, the directors, the people who built the sets, that they all be women so that they would have some experience in theater if they wanted to go on to other things. That was our political goal, economic goal, was to give women experience. And then, in the plays, to have the audience see these feminist discussions from varied points of view. We tried to do a theatrical evening, rather than a political evening.

We did it for—I think we were together four or five years. And then we began to believe our own [laughs] philosophy. So the group eventually disbanded. What happened was that we got so big that—I mean, not big in like this gigantic sense—but big in the sense that we had to go for grants and we had to hire accountants and do all this legal stuff. And Dolores, by then, knowing that now her natural ability was to be an attorney, decided to go to law school. And so the group broke up. Not because we couldn't work together—it was because the way we wrote things, and the way began seeing things, we began to think that there were these other occupations and positions in life that we should then also be the forerunners of. I became a landscape architect. One of our directors became a bishop. Some people became filmmakers and

some remained playwrights. But we broke our own barriers in a sense by having this group.  
[50:04]

**Dziedzic:** Yes, it sounds like it was an empowering space, at least to launch into the next—

**Maile:** Yes, it was great. It's so nice. You know, theater is—I imagine filmmaking too, to some extent—but when you're putting together a production with live people, and the things that happened backstage, and the accidents—not totally bad accidents, but, you know. And also how plays change—whatever actors you use, there's this constant evolution. A play is written, and then when you give it to an actor, then it grows again. When you give it to the director, it grows, so it was like watching, not just something—like, when a novel's published, it's published as whatever the final product is. But when a play is done, it's so amazing how it really is like a flower. It just keeps blossoming into so many different directions. And I think that also happened with us in doing these plays, that we also blossomed into other ways of expressing or being whoever we wanted to be.

**Dziedzic:** And how did landscape architecture fulfill that for you?

**Maile:** Well, I knew Tod a little bit. So he was an architect. And because he lived in Westbeth, I would go, and I was very friendly with his first wife. He had built, in Westbeth, this really amazing structure. He had a duplex and I think everybody had to sleep upstairs because he took the whole—I forget. But anyway, he built this, it looked like a bridge—it was really just a desk for him—but it had all these two-by-fours, and one-by-twos, and it looked like an outline of a ship because it was pointed at one end and it got wider for his desk, and then it vanished into something else. And there were all these odd places where he put his pen and triangles. And then he had the implements, what they call yellow trash and white trash, which is kind of a paper. And I had never seen architecture before. So visiting—and his wife had a couple of kids who were the same age as my kids—but in the back of my mind, every time I walked in that apartment, the first thing I would see was this incredible structure he had built.

And so after the group, I felt I wanted to be an architect. And my kids were growing up. They were now in school so I could actually think seriously about it. So I went to City College

and inquired about enrolling in the architecture program. I found out that you had to have calculus and, geometry—you had to all these math things and so I didn't have it. I just went down the list and I saw the words architecture landscape came up. Okay, so I said, what do you need for that? And they said just your degree is fine, you don't need all this extra—so that's why I chose it. Totally nothing important—it was just going down the list and finding out which thing had the word “architecture” in it that didn't require a math background. That's how I got interested.

But it had the same tools! It had the same trash paper, it had the same triangles, and the idea about design—I had gotten interested not only from Todd Williams's desk, but when we were doing productions, watching how the set designer created a set also added to my interest in how you design an environment for people and places. That's why architecture was so important to me. But I hadn't quite known that landscape architecture had so much to do with plants—but it did and it turned out to be wonderful.

I think what's so interesting about, as it turned out, for me, for landscape architecture—and referring back to what I was talking about before—is that when you're in nature, you forget who you are. You walk through a forest or something, a path—and you're suddenly someone else, not even a person. You've entered into another place. You forget—you don't forget your body but you forget that you're different. You think that you're part of the singing of the birds, or the trees, the leaves, the ground, you just are part of it. That's what I discovered with landscape architecture to some extent. [55:39]

**Dziedzic:** Yes, you kind of leave your social context and you enter into an ecological context.

**Maile:** Yes. I think it's—I mean, I hate to use the word “soul” but I think your soul makes the sudden journey into recognizing the souls of other living beings. It's that kind of communication that is without words.

**Dziedzic:** I was going to ask what sort of ideas were being taught about landscape at the time—but what you just said doesn't sound like something that anybody taught you—it's something that you know, in your body.



**Maile:** Yes. But at the time, City College had a guy who founded the Landscape Architecture Program. So that's why it was even there. Because no one would identify a city with landscape architecture. His program was actually called Urban Landscape Architecture. The whole philosophy was one about—he, once again, was someone who could get things done and wanted to be in control—so urban landscape, basically, it taught you all the things about plant materials and design, but it was also about control—control of the landscape—control of the hardscape, how things drain, how people are supposed to move in to space. It was a totally different philosophy.

It was good in the sense that he and the program recognized the need for greenspace in the city. I think he was very influential in making people realize how important having a living greenspace within the context of a city environment—how important it was for the human soul. And he had done some work with projects, down in, I think, lower Manhattan—I'm not sure—but he—he did some really beautiful work. But his main goal was taking something like landscape or nature that's untamed, and taming it so that it is beautiful, but safe. You can't have wild things growing because then the context of living there would be unsafe—people could hide behind it and it would be dangerous.

Urban landscape was basically about how to take something that's wild and turn it into a greenspace that was safe, was cosmetically—because sometimes when you walk on the Highline or some of these parts, it's like walking through a makeup counter—it's very cosmetic. It's trimmed and pruned and sterile because you don't want any fruits and seeds dropping off, you don't want too many flowers on the ground—you want them on the trees—because they'll fall, people will slip. It was great because that's how I managed to find a job later on after I got divorced.

That's why I started thinking about gendered landscape, because there was this difference between what I had seen about landscape growing up from my father's and mother's stories about growing up either in the jungle or in a rural area, and the kind of landscape that they lived through, and then there was, now, this landscape that in the philosophy that I was being educated into, which was landscape to be controlled rather than lived-with. Then, that you had to control. I felt almost that a lot of landscape is—when I say gender, I mean, really, how power is expressed in the built-environment. Power is expressed through landscape and the built environment seems more like a male-oriented thing because there's sidelines and obelisks and things that are tamed

and manipulated. Whereas, in a natural landscape, it probably still has elements of control but there's an allowance for the landscape itself to be itself, rather than to fit certain criteria. And that's kind of like how women throughout history always had to fit—and nature had to fit—certain criteria, which were much more onerous than what males have had to do, have had to fulfill. [1:01:23]

**Dziedzic:** Yes, adapting being kind of like a continual process in life. Can you talk about some of the gardens that you designed?

**Maile:** Yes. Well, as it turned out, I became what they call a resident engineer. I didn't exactly design anything, except I revised the designs. And I designed a couple of things, privately, and then I did an AIDS garden at one point for a children's aid organization.

The path to promotion, for me, was through resident engineering, so I wound up being Deputy Director of Construction for the Parks Department. My involvement in design was mostly fixing whatever had been designed wrongly, for whatever reason. And because I was on the site more than the designer, I understood how the site would respond to something coming on to it. For example, at Morningside Park, which is at 112th Street and Amsterdam [Avenue], it's actually an [Frederick Law] Olmstead Park, and there's ledges on top. And back then, not many people used the park because, once again, it was dangerous, there was lots of overgrown trees, drugs, there was crime. And when we first walked through it, I felt sad that we were going to change this because it seemed just a gasp of nature just burgeoning through these rocks and cliffs.

But anyway, the original design called for a pond and then this ornate staircase, which would go from the top area all the way down to—I forget the names of the streets—down to [Morningside Avenue]. And what the designer had wanted was to put a stream that ran along these steps and it was a very bad decision because of the nature of water and the nature of freezing, and thawing. Eventually, because it would be a totally pumped stream, it would eventually undermine all those steps. So I convinced the designer and the contractor to change that, to leave the steps where they were and instead create this waterfall to make those cliffs be this big actual natural element of the site—respond to its height and the rockiness of it rather

than trying to insert something that was totally unbelievable, and in fact, eventually, would be unsafe, and respect the site by putting in this waterfall. So we did, so it was great.

It was those kinds of design decisions with the AIDS garden. I and my second husband [Parviz Mohassel], we were asked to do a garden and it was so—this organization was one of the first to respond to the needs of children who had been born with AIDS from their mothers. It wasn't exactly an orphanage—they would stay there for six or eight months. While they tried to get some kind of help and assistance for the mothers, these kids will stay there. There would be babies up to about two or three. It was nice. It was a rather large backyard and the whole point was to make all of these—since a lot of these kids were not walking very well themselves, a lot of them would be held by the caretakers. Part of the design was to make sure there was enough tactile, visual, and sound things that would happen at the level of someone being held in their arms. So there was three levels: the level where they could crawl in the grass, there were some areas where they could walk, but mostly, it was being carried and then being set down on a seat or something. But it was a wonderful experience to do that. [1:07:05]

**Dziedzic:** And I also read that you were involved with converting some abandoned lots into community gardens?

**Maile:** Yes. That's right. Yes. The South Bronx Taskforce. Yes, I saw an ad in *The [New York] Times*. I was still in school, I think. I'm not sure, so long ago. It's like talking about the Time of Troubles after Ivan the Terrible [laughs].

Let's see, yes, back then, the South Bronx was a total dilemma. Buildings had been burned. There were terrible landlords. There was much more poverty. And it was a poverty that I recognized, that I had lived through it early on. And lying on every—practically every—street corner, there was a rubble-filled lot with bricks and old tires. And it was dangerous because regular people were trying to live in whatever buildings that still remained. And there was this group called the South Bronx something. And it was run by a ex-cop and this social worker, person. The idea was to involve each community, each neighborhood, in taking over one of these lots and turning them into either play or a community garden. It was great.

It was funded but not funded very well, so a lot of times we had to depend on the kindness of the neighborhood and on the expertise of some of the men, who had jobs and could

devote some amount of time to helping to take some of the brick and make a brick wall, or to help put up a post for a fence. And it was really successful. The neighborhoods—I think I worked in like six or seven—and the neighbors loved it. And it was like Westbeth in a sense because they felt a sense of pioneering this kind of endeavor, but also gathering together, which is what was Westbeth was like—is like, still, in many ways. And doing something actively that they could not do individually. We were just facilitators for that.

And in the end, when I wound up working for the Parks Department, the Parks Department took over those areas and kept maintaining them. I don't know how long that lasted because now everything is being developed and built. But for a good, at least eight or ten years after I had done that job, the Parks Department was still maintaining those spaces. [1:10:19]

**Dziedzic:** Amazing. I'd love to know where some of them are.

**Maile:** I think they're all gone. There was one—my favorite people were the ones called the Hoe Avenue, H-o-e, Hoe Avenue Garden. There was this woman, Rosa, who I actually got really friendly with. She had a couple of kids and she was really young, and she had grandkids by then. And she was, once again, like Dolores, a local organizer. And we got really friendly and I brought her back—she'd spent a couple of nights—every now and then, I'd take her back to Westbeth so she could see how the other parts of Manhattan because she had never really been out of the South Bronx. I'd take her to Manhattan. And the first day she walked into Westbeth, she said, “God, it looks like a prison!” Because of the long hallways. She wasn't that impressed, whatsoever! [laughs] “My God!”

But yes, I got really close to a lot of those people because, once you get past the visuals, people are really amazing—amazing in their generosity and their vision. I mean, she had a vision in her in her way and she tried to make people share that vision with her. And it was something simple—it wasn't something complicated. It was just having a sitting area on the corner of this lot. You would be out of traffic, there would be a tree, there would be a couple of benches, and you can have your own plot. That was the other thing—I tried to do plots so that everyone would have a plot so they could garden and have flowers or vegetables. Later, it turned out that maybe having vegetables wasn't that great an idea because of all the things in the soil [laughs] of the buildings. But we did raised beds, so hopefully that didn't contribute to anyone's ill health.

**Dziedzic:** Yes. Can you talk about your transition from the Parks Department to doing fine arts?

**Maile:** Yes [laughs]. I sound like such a dilettante, just going from one thing to another, just like a stray leaf that just falls whatever it falls and suddenly I'm doing something else. But, in effect, really, I think, I think I've always been who I am, it's just sometimes you just don't know who you are until you just find yourself in these experiences and you respond to it. It's like, you, yourself, are a vehicle of photosynthesis. Every experience translates into something that you didn't know you didn't have inside of you but it suddenly energizes you like light and water energizes the plant. I think we're all, in effect—we're processing a lot of our experiences, and some, like me, who is both courageous and afraid, will take advantage of. So anyway! What I'm saying is that it's not like a suddenly new thing.

I mean, I had always—as a landscape architect—even as a resident engineer, you do have to draw these things out for contractors, or review shop drawings, or review the design. I was really familiar with renderings, watercolor renderings, and how to put together a composition that that showed what something would be like even when it didn't exist. You have to convince someone—like when I was doing these gardens, I would have to draw what it would look like for them so they could envision it.

The transition was really easy. But what happened was, I was walking around the building one day—I had retired, I took early retirement, thank God. The Parks Department is a great department. It's small, they can respond very quickly to things, they are cover a whole array of historic buildings and parks and recreation. It's a nice, varied department—but it's a bureaucracy at the same time. So I took early retirement. And I was walking around Westbeth I-building one day. And I didn't even know this existed—that's what's that's what's interesting about Westbeth in terms of its age is that people would do things in spaces and when they died, or moved out, people would forget that those spaces existed.

One day, I was walking around the I-building, and I guess the maintenance men had to go into the printmaking studio to do something but they didn't close the door. And I was walking around and I open the door and there was this print studio that had been really active in the '70s and '80s, had been really created by the print makers at Westbeth. I found out later all the things they did to get the printing press. They had two printing presses that someone donated, they had

lockers donated from the one of the steamship lines, they had people build tables—but they had all died out. And you walked into this space, which was, at the time, rather large.

There were these printing presses and papers but it looked like someone had just left—left for the afternoon and hadn't come back yet. Because there were inks, and brayers, and papers, and chemicals, and some odd equipment in the sink. Jars of stuff and shelves that have been built. And it looked like, really, that a bomb dropped and only the personnel died and everything else remained the same.

People at Westbeth—the biggest thing is having a studio, and here was this whole space that no one—that a lot of people have forgotten. I think maybe some people might have remembered but there wasn't an active printmaking group at the time so no one was using this. No one had even mentioned this. I imagine some people knew about it, but maybe they were not printmakers, and they just—anyway. [1:17:30]

I didn't tell anyone I had found this. And I forget out how I got the key to it. And I was so intrigued by all the tools that I began reading about how to be a printmaker. And so for months, people would say, "Where are you going?" "No, I'm just going for a walk." [laughs] And finally, I had to tell someone, and then everyone crawled out and said, "Oh, we should have a printmakers thing again!" So that's how it happened, then organized the printmakers group.

But, like landscape, Westbeth, because it's so big and complex, there's so much history within those spaces, and some of those spaces—now everyone knows where everything is but there was a real quiescent period in the '90s through 2010 or something that—I think people were either growing older, kids had moved away, people had health problems—so there were spaces that had been so incredibly active, that, had, like Morningside Park, gone into a dormant situation, and no one—and so that's how I became a printmaker. I found this little overgrown garden. [laughs]

And so I was intrigued by the idea of printmaking because I've always been intrigued by tools. When I first moved into Westbeth, I worked as a carpenter for about four or five years. And so the idea of learning how to use the etching press, and how to mix various inks, and all the equipment that is necessary to make a print, the kinds of papers, was really intriguing. And in that process, as I said in the beginning, then you begin to know what you know. A lot of the history of my parents began to come through in the artwork. [1:20:06]

**Dziedzic:** Yeah, can you talk about that in a little bit more detail?

**Maile:** Oh, okay. A lot of times when you're growing up, you see a lot of things, and you either consciously reject it or you don't—you ignore it or you just feel uncomfortable with it, or it's not that important. But when you're doing artwork, it's like being a miner—you have to kind of look through things, look through yourself to find out what it is you're trying to say. Because it's not just having the tools—even though I love tools. I sometimes see a really wonderful screwdriver that has a nice tang to it and it's old—so I love the feeling of how things are manipulated. I guess that's part of being the gender—of this cusp of being either man or woman. But anyway, you have to have something to express or else you're just using your tools like the craftsman, which is also good, but that's—anyway.

First, I started out just doing landscape, so I would do monoprints of trees and water, a lot of stuff like that. And then that's when I began to remember all of these stories that my parents had told about living a much different life—a life that incorporated the unseen as well as the seen, spirits and ghosts. Superstitions have a bad connotation, but just connections between how your actions influence other things and influence how your life proceeds from that.

But anyway, I began to remember these stories, and the context of those stories was also the control that British colonialism and British imperialism had on both those islands and how it thwarted a lot of the culture and language of the place. And also made people kind of deny who they were, in favor of being who they were supposed to be, in terms of this structure that the colonialism brought to those islands. That's how I began in investigating in my own ancestry.

Then, once again, through that—since I didn't experience it firsthand—part of that became not a fantasy but an extension of how that colonialism also translated into how women are treated—they're treated like a territory by a lot of other people. The territory of a woman's body was also kind of this investigation into the colonialism of my parents—what they had gone through.

**Dziedzic:** Can you give some examples about how you incorporated that colonial history into your work? It strikes me as something that's very different from the superstitions that you'd mentioned—the unseen—but at the same time, in a way it is also unseen. So how did you bring that forth?

**Maile:** Let's see. It's hard to do it without—so I did a piece of my grandmother. She had gotten some award in grammar school, and she treasured this. It was like this little diploma—not a diploma—she'd won a little book. And it was maybe for perfect attendance. And she treasured this everywhere she went, and it was in her album of keepsakes. But at the same time, she was haunted by what she called the woman with no face, who would follow her around if she was coming back to her house late at night, or if there was a crossroads, there would be this woman with no face, who would accost her. And she was always dressed as a proper English lady, except she had no face. This was this terrifying apparition, not every time, but whenever she least expected it. On one hand, she felt threatened by this person that had no face but dressed as a proper English lady.

And at the same time, she was so proud of this diploma that had been given by this school. Oh, I know, she had won a George Eliot book called *The Mill on the Floss*, which she never read. But it was this little—she described it because it got lost when she moved to the States—but it was like this little red book and she regretted, always, having lost this *Mill on the Floss* book. I tried to read it once but I couldn't finish it. What I did was this collage piece with a woman with no face, my grandmother, the thing, and then I, myself, in it on the telephone, being the medium through which these two pieces would come together. [1:26:37]

**Dziedzic:** Thanks so much for that visual description. I know, it's difficult to—you make your artwork to communicate it. So I do appreciate that you put words to that work. Can you talk about working with Dan Rice and what that experience was like?

**Maile:** You've really done a lot of research! [laughs] Did I say anything that wasn't true—would you know?

**Dziedzic:** [laughs] I'm not here to fact check at all. I trust you more than the research.

**Maile:** That's great. [laughs] Okay. Dan Rice was an amazing, amazing, Abstract Expressionist teacher. I mean, that's what he drew but he was a teacher of art—he wasn't married to whatever thing that he loved to do. He was part of that first generation of artists, so he knew intimately



[Willem] de Kooning and Franz Kline, they got drunk together. [Mark] Rothko—he would tell us these amazing stories of what they were like, and how flawed they were but how talented they could be. In fact, *Red*, do you know the play, *Red*? It was on Broadway a couple of years ago, and was about Mark Rothko and his assistant. And his assistant is based on Dan Rice. Because Dan was his assistant for years, building his canvases for him.

So anyway, he moved to Connecticut and we had friends who lived in Connecticut and they knew him, and they were taking an art class from him. And so, every Friday, my second husband and I would drive up and take this class. And first I had class with him. At first, we thought, oh, you know, maybe we'll take one or two. And it turned out that there are people that are artists, and there are people that can talk about art, and there are people that have a history of knowing people who do art. And he was this amazing combination of all three.

But he was also, himself, flawed—he had various problems with substance abuse. He knew, from inside out, not only the joy of making work, which he never lost, but the frustration of trying to do it all the time and maybe not being appreciated—not having other people recognize what you're doing. I mean, they don't have to buy it, but at least some people that could recognize what you're trying to do. He understood all of that. He understood the disappointment and the joy, and the technique—he was really good on technique.

Every two hours on Friday, we would go to this class along with five or six or eight other people who were all, actually, well trained artists as well. It wasn't like a beginner class—it was like a group of people, as a group, forging ahead on this train that Dan Rice was building. And it's a shame that he's not as well-known as he is. We tried to put together a website of his work not too long ago, but there were all these legal things with his estate that we just couldn't go ahead. But if you're familiar with de Kooning, and Klein and Rothko, and Frankenthaler, and all these people—you see in their work what he has done in his work. The depth of the color, the gesture. It's not just a thought—it's like walking into nature, like you forget who you are when you look at some of his pieces.

We all, this group that took this class, got really close, and a lot of them have known each other already, they all lived in Connecticut. So for the next seventeen or eighteen years, we would all go up as a group, rent a big house, and paint in Maine. That was wonderful. Maine is a great place to paint. But the best part was making food—because this is what he lived through

with these guys because a lot of these painters know how to cook amazingly well, because, I mean, they did because they had to make these meals on their own. So Dan was a great cook.

When we were up there, we were re-living a little bit of what it must have been like in the '50s, you know, drinking a lot, cooking, painting, doing that stuff. It wasn't just the painting, it was actually this whole atmosphere of letting it loose and, and letting it loose in Maine, which, on one hand is a very kind of conservative state, and on the other hand, has had her history of people letting loose as painters. But we're still hoping that we can get something together so that more people would know his work. But right now it's practically completely invisible. [1:32:50]

**Dziedzic:** Yes, I had to learn who he was—I didn't recognize his name from that scene, yes. What was the process like of developing your own practice, and figuring out how you wanted to tell the stories that you wanted to tell within that group of people, that kind of cohort that you've mentioned over the course of twenty years?

**Maile:** What was good was that every night, or every couple of nights—I think maybe three or four times in that two-week period—we would have a critique. We'd show the work that we had done the previous two or three days and then everybody was very kind, but they were also professional painters. You would learn a lot about, in a very kind and gentle way, very insightful, perceptive things about what you were trying to do. And it was like being guided—not telling you exactly the path you should take, but what you should look out for, basically. I think that was really helpful because I tended to be really psychological when I first started painting.

Printmaking was one thing, but painting, you know, tends to be a little more emotionally wrought, because you're just doing it in the presence. With printmaking, there's so many steps and so much unknown about how it will be in the end because it depends on—when you pull up that paper, you don't exactly know how the colors interact, or how the paper or the pressure of the press—but in in painting, you see it as you go along. When I first started out, it was really psychological. I was painting being sad or depressed using dark colors. In fact, I've tried to get rid of a lot of that, because it was really all—it was like a process. That's what helped me, was not to be—of course, anything you do is psychological but mine was so conscious that it was still just being on the surface of myself, rather than investigating how to see, I guess.

My painting has evolved from this kind of realistic landscape—nature, trees—to once again, going into—I found my language during those twenty years of visual expression in birds. I’ve been painting birds and women turning into birds, or birds turning into women. Yes, I’ve been doing that. It wasn’t that they changed my style—it was kind of like therapy [laughs] because they all were going through the same thing. They were all professional painters, they loved doing it, but they needed someone on that same level to stand outside and say this is working for me, and this is not working for me. But what are you trying to say? And by expressing that in these critiques, it was really helpful in finding your visual voice. [1:36:44]

**Dziedzic:** And what sort of reception has your work had?

**Maile:** It’s been great. Well, it’s been great in this really small way [laughs]. It’s been great in this little-pond way. I’m in the Sackler Collection and I recently got into White Columns, which is a nice gallery. I have had shows in Maine and New York, but now I’m really—now that I’ve gotten so much older—you know, sometimes, I always think now that I’m younger than my kids because I can’t believe how old they are. And I think, no, I can’t be older than them because that’s really old, what they are now! [laughs] So like everyone else who’s in Westbeth, concentrating on—to use the word legacy is kind of self-important—but to really finally have the courage and fear to begin seriously showing—not just doing the work but showing the work. Having it be seen, be exhibited. Because, yes, this is your last chance anyway. I mean, these days are your last day—actually, every day is your last day, but when you get older, it becomes [laughs] much closer. That’s what I’m doing is taking myself much more seriously.

**Dziedzic:** Yes, and take those little-pond successes wherever you can! However you feel about them, they’re significant.

**Maile:** Yes. Especially now that they beginning to recognize a lot of these women artists. Hilda af Klimt—there’s all these women that worked invisibly during their lives because they were so overshadowed by their male colleagues who are now finally getting the recognition. And in many cases, they were the forerunners of what later became famous through their male

counterparts. So, yes, it's really important to be part of that group of women who worked no matter what and just leave something behind.

**Dziedzic:** Yes. And what is the—how do you feel the space for feminist art has—if you were engaging with it directly in the early '70s through some of the plays that you were producing and writing—what's the difference now in this other art world space for the work that you're doing that's feminist work but also anti-colonial work? [1:40:23]

**Maile:** Yes, I think it's all part of a continuum. Now it's much more—not accepted—but it's a much more stronger presence. Before it was kind of a—I did a film about Anita Steckel. Do you know, Anita Steckel? She was a really fantastic feminist artist, really well known in the '60s because she campaigned—she was like the Guerrilla Girls. She campaigned against male-dominant museums, she did a lot of paintings with penises, she painted the Mona Lisa holding the brush because she finally had the power to hold the brushes. She taught at the Art Students League. I did a film on her, so I know a lot about her. And now recently, people have rediscovered her.

That's what I was saying—there been all along a feminist art practice. And it's only now that we recognize it's always been this. It's always been strong, it's always had a point of view, it's always had a visual language of irony and humor, but mostly of strength, determination. All sorts of images and imagery that they have used that went under the radar for so long. It's not like it's something new—it's always been there. It's just that now, people are more accepting of the idea that art is not just a male-dominated profession the way other things have been dominated. Now, what will happen in the in the future, I don't know. I don't know how long a dialogue like this continues because you're hoping for, on one hand, that in the end, it doesn't make any difference whether you're male or female, that it's the strength of the art that's important. But at the same time, their voices have been so suppressed for so long, and that we haven't still yet heard a lot of what women have to say that, that I hope this kind of dialogue continues.

**Dziedzic:** Thank you. So I guess, we can think about wrapping up the interview. And I had a few questions about what the impact of being at Westbeth has been for you, and I know that you also received the Pollock-Krasner grant and grant from the Joan Mitchell Foundation. And—

**Maile:** Oh yeah. Right, I have to apply for those again! [laughs]

**Dziedzic:** And I wondered if you could comment on—I wouldn't have used this word but you described yourself as a dilettante moving from different—I wouldn't have thought it that way because it does make a lot of sense to me, because, for whatever reason, we can or we need to shift through different positions in the world, and identities and spaces that we occupy. One thing that's so strange to me is having stable housing as someone who's lived in the city for twenty years and lived in, you know, ten different apartments or something like that. So I wonder if you can reflect on what that—how you've been able to build your career and take it in different directions from a space that, to me, as an outsider, seems really stable.

**Maile:** Yes, no, it's interesting, because when my first husband and I moved back to New York, we lived in—one, two, three, four—we moved every year! In the five years we were here, I think we moved four times. And then we moved into Westbeth, and then, although he left, then I wound up staying fifty years it was like a caprice that lasted forever. So stable, affordable housing—not just for artists, but for everyone—I think is the single most—other than health insurance—is the single most important issue. The reason why I think Westbeth is so important, just because the arts are important to human life, and how we see the world.

But as an artist, I was able to—while having to still raise kids and have a full-time job, the idea that I didn't have to devote all of my earnings to rent and that there was no threat of eviction—it is like a paradise. Even though there's problems with the building and plumbing and heating, it's—I'm speechless because I'm not quite sure exactly how to describe the feeling of security and happiness that living in this building has brought not only to me but to seeing the importance of how art—that's what's really important—it's not just my work that is important. It's the work of well-known and less well-known artists who live here, who do these extraordinary things with their minds and their hands in creating—sometimes you walk into their apartments and you cannot believe, looking at them, that they could do such things!

And once everyone moves in, it's very rare to move out because it's like moving out of the Garden of Eden. It fulfills so many things about being an artist, and also about being an outsider—I think a lot of artists feel kind of like they're outside of society and outside of the normal common communication, the normal goals and wishes that most people have. In this place, all these outsiders have found a community. Whether they join it or not, there's a feeling that they can think of creating work. [1:47:39]

That's been so important. My second husband is creating, actually, an archive of some of the work that people have created so that there's physical evidence of the kind of work that has been done here. And you feel it in the energy as you walk through this building. What's so sad is that, we all—most of the people I know—moved in in the '70s. This building has aged in the same way we've aged, and so some have stopped making art, either physically or because they just can't mentally handle doing it, or for various reasons. And so the building itself is also facing a kind of conflicted identity, because it's—as I say, the plumbing system is messed up, the roofs are leaking, there's all sorts of problems. We had Hurricane Sandy, which completely destroyed the basement. We've never actually even gone back to using the basement the way we used to, so there's a loss of studio space, which has been a really severe stress on a lot of people who had studio spaces in the basement.

There's this aging that's gone on kind of hand-in-hand—the aging of the artists who moved in and see all the changes that have been made in their body and changes that have been made in their building. And for a long time, because nobody moved out, we had a waiting list that was closed because there was nobody moving out. But now, as with nature, people are passing on, and you feel this new energy coming in as people move into the building. That's great.

The only problem is, whether there's enough funding to continue this kind of utopia for the next fifty years. There's a lot of pressure from commercial real estate, there's a lot of pressure on just how fast the building is deteriorating. And, in some ways, the people who moved in, although they bring a lot of creative energy, some of them don't have that same communal energy that the people brought with them in the early days. So there's a struggle. We have a Westbeth Artists Residents Tenants Council, which depends on volunteers to have events and program classes and do all those things. It's really been hard to get volunteers because that optimism and can-do sense—that every day is going to be a great day—is not quite there with

some of the new tenants. They're raising families and they're also having to work. We're at a kind of important tipping point. We need residents, who will volunteer to do things, we need fundraising for the building.

And there's this institutional memory, that will—I mean, thank you for interviewing me, and George [Cominskie] and Ralph [Lee]—but there is an institutional memory of what it felt like to be on the cusp of this new beginning, when you moved into this building in the '70s, that anything was possible, that you were possible. [1:51:34]

**Dziedzic:** I don't think I can end it better than that. [laughs] That's such a wonderful sentiment. And obviously Westbeth is such a treasure. So I really wish you the best and finding everything that you need to secure the building and preserve this kind of opportunity far into the future. Is there anything else that that we haven't covered?

**Maile:** No, there's a lot of gossip! I mean, that's what I meant about institutional memory—there's a lot of—people would say, “Oh, yes, I knew that that's what was happening in that building!”

But I also want to just say that it's not just affordable—but it's affordable housing for everyone. I think everyone should have this opportunity that we've had here to live forever, or for five years—however they want—to live in a place that gives them the opportunity to—something that my parents didn't have—to think in terms of envisioning themselves to be something else or someone else. I needed that. And to give security to your kids as they grow up. I'm not sure where the city is heading with affordable housing—Manhattan is, as you know—are you in Manhattan?

**Dziedzic:** I live in Queens, actually.

**Maile:** Oh, you live in Queens? Oh, my, web guy lives in Queens. He lives in a basement. He likes it because he can get his bike in and out very easily.

**Dziedzic:** That makes sense.

**Maile:** Yes, I've never really—I've been to Flushing, but that's it.

**Dziedzic:** I live kind of right on the border of Brooklyn.

**Maile:** Oh, really?

**Dziedzic:** Yes, so not too far into Queens, off the M train. One of the ends of the M train that ends in Queens!

**Maile:** Well, that's nice. Do you like living in Queens?

**Dziedzic:** Yes. I appreciate the smaller-scale.

**Maile:** Yes!

**Dziedzic:** But to what you were saying about affordable housing, I think sometimes people have it in their mind that, you know, when you're in a stressful financial situation, that the only thing that's going to solve it is a million dollars, but it isn't.

**Maile:** No, not at all!

**Dziedzic:** It's such a small increment—

**Maile:** Yes.

**Dziedzic:** —that that allows you to free up that space to start to have that generosity and have that sense of security and reduce that stress. I've certainly lived through that myself, and wish there was more of an awareness that, you know, no one's trying to get rich here! We're all just trying to like, move up that—[1:55:07]

**Maile:** I know, I know—they should have an affordable housing for historians!



**Dziedzic:** Right, yes. And my partner is an artist, a visual artist. I completely understand the need for studio space and you know, everything that—

**Maile:** Do they work in your apartment, or they have a studio?

**Dziedzic:** At the moment, he has a room in our apartment that's kind of a studio, but really only room for like a tabletop kind of practice. And, you know, no chemicals and stuff. But he used to have a studio, like an external space—different places over the years. For the last few years, it's just seemed, you know, as the prices of studio space goes up to even more expensive than residential—

**Maile:** Has he looked into ArtBuilt?

**Dziedzic:** I'm not sure. Maybe—

**Maile:** Because they have studios, long term studios. I'm not sure what the prices are but the person who runs it is on the board. And she's committed to having affordable studios, but he might look into that.

That's also a problem here, with Hurricane Sandy destroying all of the studio spaces. I mean, we can't bring them back, until we have a whole other millions-of-dollars renovation to meet building code—before, people didn't even follow the building code. So there's, as I said, there's a lot of stress, same as your partner with the lack of studio space.

**Dziedzic:** Yes. And then, you kind of find yourself forced to adapt your practice too.

**Maile:** Yes. And do miniature paintings.

**Dziedzic:** Yes, which is sometimes really great and other times it's not fulfilling.

**Maile:** Oh, I know. Because this friend of mine was painting in her apartment and she got a studio somewhere. And she's, she said, "You don't know the freedom of making large canvases." She said, "It's so liberating to do these!" Now she's doing these gigantic things that she was doing the same thing but very small. And now, she's doing it in this, and she said it's like being born again.

**Dziedzic:** Wow. Yes. We'll hope for that opportunity for more people.

**Maile:** Yes.

**Dziedzic:** Well, thank you so much, Christina. It was so wonderful to talk with you.

**Maile:** Well, it was great that you did all that research. Thank you for being interested, that was great. [1:57:38]

**END OF RECORDING**

## Oral History Interview with Christina Maile, October 26, 2021

Narrator(s)	Christina Maile
Address	Westbeth Artist Housing
Birthyear	-
Birthplace	Brooklyn, NY
Narrator Age	-
Interviewer	Sarah Dziedzic
Place of Interview	remote
Date of Interview	October 26, 2021
Duration of Interview	118 mins
Number of Sessions	1
Waiver Signed/copy given	Y
Photographs	Y
Format Recorded	32 kHz
Archival File Names	-
MP3 File Name	Maile_Christina_VillagePreservationOralHistory_zoomaudio.mp3 [70.9 MB]
Order in Oral Histories	49 [#3 2021]