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**SKOWHEGAN SCHOOL
OF PAINTING & SCULPTURE
Skowhegan, Maine**

**Lecture by George McNeill
Summer, 1982**

Transcriber: Judith Stoodley

Introduction (in progress): ...must have been wild. There was a famous gallery in New York that discovered a lot of artists. He was a real funny guy, by the name of Charlie Egan. And... oh, Kline was there; Pollock was there; de Kooning was there, I guess. And George there... from 1950, '52, '53 and '54. In the Sixties he showed at the Howard Wise Gallery for four or five times, and then Poindexter—all very distinct galleries. He also showed out of town at California—the New de Young Museum, the University of California Santa Cruz, and various others. The most recent show, and it was sort of a return to the art scene for George was this last year at the Gruenbaum Gallery. He was praised highly, and made a lot richer. I guess that's the easiest way of saying it. He sold out. Takes a long time sometimes.... He's appeared in all the museums. He's very knowledgeable about the old club days; he was part of the scene. He's been very knowledgeable about what's happening in New York City, the city he was born in, for the past sixty-odd/seventy-odd years. He's a mine of information. He's going to talk about his own work now; and then... please... participate by asking him any questions that you want. He'll be glad to respond. At the present time he's been teaching at Pratt... and...been a major force at the New York Studio School. Welcome, George.

(Applause)

Speaker: Thank you. You now have a chance to... to make things even... because I've been criticizing your work...at the beginning of the week, and now you have a chance to get even with *me*. I would like this evening to be as informal as possible... and it would please me very much if you would sing out... when I show the slides... and make comments, or ask questions in relation to what you see. What Sidney said is true in a way... I am a mine of information, in the sense that I've been around... in New York since the second phase of the issue, the beginning of modern art. You might say that there have been four phases. The first began about 1910... mostly from painters who were in Paris, like Patrick Bruce, and Max Weber. That was at the beginning of Cubism and Futurism; and many Americans, like others... became somewhat dazzled... tremendously excited by the possibilities of a whole new kind of art which would be abstract. The highly revolutionary, you might say.... Now there weren't many involved in this... I think hardly twenty, more like fifteen, perhaps. And this might be called an enthusiasm phase of modern art... because it started off with a great bang; and then somewhat petered out at around 1915... and was mostly moribund by 1925. There were certain artists like Demuth... who continued on, working in an abstract way, but not really making any signal contribution in the sense of influencing younger American artists. And then of course there was Georgia O'Keeffe, who more or less started to work abstractly about 1913; and you know, thank God, here she is, very much alive—I think she's about 96 now, and continuing. But this first phase... maybe typified best by Max Weber, had gotten tired... by 1920, and there was something of a reversion to more conventional art. Then there was a generation of artists which you might call the generation of 1905... DeKooning, 1904; I think Rothko, 1906; Pollock later, 1912; me, 1908.... Anyway, there were a number of artists born before and after...1905. Now the first part of this group born around 1905 surfaced around 1930. This would include Louise Bourgeois. I mean, not Louise Bourgeois—Louise Nevelson, who'll be coming here. Louise Bourgeois also; I think she was born 1912, but I—(laughing) I'm not going to get into trouble with girls' ages. (laughter) But anyway, I *think* so. (laughter) I *know* I'm wrong! But anyway... anyway... What I'm trying to say then that is the second wave of abstract art began around 1930, when most of us were around twenty-five years old. Now I'd like to make a point which is going to be hard to communicate to you; and that is that... in your whole lifetime you have never known anything except modern art. And you should know that, as of about 1930, and indeed until 1948, there wasn't a single gallery in New York devoted to American modern art, not one. In this period...

there was Stuart Davis, who I think was born around 1895... so that in 1930 he would have been about—around thirty-five.... And then there was John Graham, who was somewhat older, I think born around 1880, maybe; and he would have been about fifty.... Arshile Gorky, as I said, born around 1904.... And then an artist not well known, but very much a part of the modern contribution then... Jan Matulka—about the same as Davis, maybe around thirty-five or forty in 1930. They all struggled. There was a little bit of a place for Stuart Davis; he was like the Queen's radical. He was more or less accepted as *the* American modern of that period. But nevertheless all of those whom I mentioned, when the WPA project got started a little later in 1935, they too were very happy to get \$23.86 a week... as far as their art was concerned. There was no place for American modern art until about 1948, and really not until about 1953. There was a show in Chicago, at the Art Institute, 1947, I believe; I think that was the first show of American abstract art in America—American abstract art. And then the Museum of Modern Art put on a show in 1951... and really that was their first recognition of American art—American abstract art. Now a group of us got together around 1935, perhaps coincident with the beginning of the project. That was Burgoyne...Diller; that was George Byron Browne; that was... "Isabella Tovsky" ... I think there were seven of us.... Who's the sculptor who does the configurations—Lassaw—Ibram Lassaw also one of those... Seven of us started a group called the American abstract artists; and that grew to about thirty-five by 1937. No one paid any attention to us; we had to put on our own shows, and it would be ridiculous to think that anyone earned their living by the sale of their painting. So we got a start. Then the war came along, and the war knocked everything to pieces. I remember... I think it was 1944... I was in the Navy, and Reinhardt was in the Navy; and Reinhardt said there was a young painter who was very good. I said, "What's his name?" He said, "His name's Pollock." I said, "How the hell can there be someone's who's good that I don't know about. It's ridiculous; he can't be any good!" That was the beginning of what you might call the third phase; and then everything changed. I was working for Pratt, in the evening program, and I was influential in getting people that worked for me, like Nakian... like Guston... like "Mussacano" (Marsacano)...like Kline—Kline taught a—the most elementary class in beginning drawing—Tony Smith taught a class in drafting.... And that was in like 1952 and 1953—Guston a class in figure drawing.... I remember that Kline had nothing in 1952; and in 1953 he was buying a pair of shoes for \$135, which maybe would be like \$500 now. So the modern art world, that... you know now, came into existence really around

1952/1953. Now I had hardly caught on, you might say; and I didn't realize it at the time, but then the fourth phase came in in 1960; and that time is the period that I like to say *I fell off the art wagon*. I didn't know it at the time; it took me about until 1964 to pick myself up and realize that a great change had... taken place. But you might say that everything that I know, everything that I show you, is a product of pre-1960. Something funny has happened, and that is that, while Expressionism was a dirty word, between about 1960 and God (laughing) knows what!—about three months ago, or six months ago—(laughter) I don't know—a year ago? I can't figure it out! Well, let's say very recently... it seems that I've caught up with the wagon... and I've jumped on it! So anyway I've sketched out what I can tell that I know something about the development of modern art from 1930—American modern art from 1930... until 1960; and it would... refresh me very much if you would just ask your questions—you don't have to be polite; just speak out—and then maybe we can have some kind of a dialogue as we go along. We'll surely have questions in the end; but I'd appreciate very much if we can make the whole thing informal, and start talking to each other slide by slide by slide. Okay, let's start. Now a few times... in the next hour or so, I'm going to be talking about my luck. I had great luck at the beginning, in the sense that I went to a good art school—I mean a good high school—where there was a good deal of culture.... I came from a working class family...very sparse, very spare... As far as art was concerned almost nothing... good people, but a very meager background. But I had very good art teachers.... And then maybe more important, at the Brooklyn Museum they had art classes for high school students on Saturday mornings. This was *not* the Brooklyn Museum Art School; this was long before that time.... I'm talking now about 1926...1927...1928. I think I did this at that time, when I was either seventeen or eighteen years old. In other words, more or less a formal kind of... pastel. But what is ten times as significant, ten times as lucky... is that, at the Brooklyn Museum was housed a collection of art called the *Societe Anonyme*. It was a collection put together by Katherine Dreyer; it is now housed in the Yale Museum. Katherine Dreyer lived in downtown Brooklyn; and she just put her collection in the Museum. That meant that I was—when I was sixteen/seventeen/eighteen, I already knew about Marcel Duchamp and Picabia, and Picasso and Matisse... and all these modern art figures. In other words I got a real sophisticated beginning... when I was still in high school. Next, please.

SLIDE

Question: (unintelligible)

Speaker: No, it was not a self-portrait...no. I wish it (laughs) was, but it wasn't. (laughter) No... I was ugly from the beginning! Now a second point of luck.... Many of the students here feel unhappy sometimes because they think that their teachers are not up to their expectations or their aims.... I always like to remember that... I think it was Shaw who said, "God sometimes punishes us by giving us what we pray for." This was a—this is from a class at Pratt. I entered Pratt in 1927... and it was taught by academic teachers very strong in watercolor painting. But the truth is, it was the tail end of a movement which had started in England around 1800. You all know the watercolors of Turner and of Kauffman... and these early pioneering landscape painters. It had then become quite conventionalized... Well, of course, 127 years.... But there were two points in relation to this conventional watercolor painting. One was that the medium of watercolor called for a certain directness, a certain spontaneity. And the other was that you also were enabled to make a better watercolor painting if you used a large brush. So that... somehow by the grace of God, I made free paintings without *knowing* that there was anything called a free painting, when I was about nineteen years old. Really what you see here is a kind of Fauve painting. If I—this painting actually was maybe fifteen by twenty; but if it had been... say... four feet by five feet, it would have been a startling contribution... at the time. (laughter) As it was, you know, nobody paid any particular attention to it. But—I've been talking to the students, I've been hammering at my students in relation to luminosity; and I'm a little bit stunned, when I look at this painting to see that in the left-hand corner I mixed a dark blue and alizarin crimson to get a broken shadow. Now you should all realize that all work seems to get better when it's projected; it seems to get a *natural* light, you know, from being projected. But the painting is pretty luminous anyway. So... one way or another, although I was in a quite conservative school, I developed a certain kind of freedom when I was quite young, like nineteen. And that stayed with me; and I'll explain that a little bit later. Next, please.

SLIDE

Now this is... 1929... and 1929 is an epochal date in the history of modern art, because it's the Museum of Modern Art opened. And I was saying to my students yesterday I believed that at some point around 1950 or 1952 I thought to myself, "How is it that I know so much about

modern painting?” Because I hadn’t read that many books about *it*. But I knew about Beckman; I knew about “Lamanq” (Lamang?); I knew about De Chirico and all these...artists. Then I suddenly realized that in fact I had gone to school to the Museum of Modern Art. Their first exhibition was of Cezanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Seurat. They were two measly, dull unimportant Cézannes in the Metropolitan at that time. But there, in 1929 I probably could have seen ten important Cézannes at the beginning of the Museum of Modern Art. Then in 1929—or 1928 really—something also happened that was important in my life; and that is that an artist name “Vakliv Vitlochel”, still alive, maybe 92, gave a series of lectures at the Art Students League. He’s been studying with Hofmann... and he more or less presented, in a kind of logical way, the significance of modern art. As of 1929 you can say that there hadn’t been any significant writing on modern art. That’s pretty late. I mean Roger Frye and Clive Bell had written essays... Kandinsky had written a book, **The Art of Spiritual Harmony**; but there hadn’t been any kind of what you might call a systematic approach to modern art. Now when I heard these talks, in... December of 1928, and maybe March of 1929, it changed my whole life. And I... I didn’t resolve to follow modern art; it wasn’t the Pied Piper. I was just stuck with it. And from that point on I knew I couldn’t do anything else. So here I did this painting.... I’m about twenty at the time.... When I look at it now, I think it’s “Blamanc”, or maybe a little bit of “Lamanque”, or German Expressionism, or what.... But it’s a free painting... also, like I was saying before. Now... I am, I believe, of the first generations of American artists who did not get any real conventional training. I never learned to paint in what you might call a conservative way. In other words, I’ve been a modern artist more or less since I was nineteen—eighteen or nineteen years old. All right, next.

SLIDE

I left Pratt at the end of my second year in 1929; and I began to work by myself at the Metropolitan Museum. Now once again I can give you some idea of the poverty of modern art, say as of 1929, in that... Stuart Davis was given a class at the Art Students League. And I signed up to be the monitor for the class. Guess how many students registered. A big fat zero! Not one. So I kept working myself at the Metropolitan Museum, drawing mostly from the Greek casts, the Classical casts that were there; but already in a sophisticated way. And then by a very lucky happenstance, Arshile Gorky was there at the same time, also working from the... Greek

casts—but he was painting them. Now Gorky—Gorky’s official age is 1904; I can hardly believe it—I think it’s like 1900; because when I met him in 1929, he seemed like a much, much older man. I mean, he didn’t seem like he was *four* years older than I was; he was more like *ten* years older. But anyway... he was one of the very few, as I said, who were involved in modern art in New York at that time. Now this I did when I was twenty—it’s nothing much; but already you can see that I’m working with planes, and that I’ve been influenced by Cubism and so forth, composition and so forth.... I still have the painting—(laughs) as I have a few thousand others... But anyway... next... slide

SLIDE

Okay, then in the Fall of 1931, Matulka was given a class at the Art Students League, and I joined that. That class had already been taught for a year; and that class was... the other Smith—What’s his name?—Tony Smith—Not Tony Smith—the other Smith.... David Smith, yes. David Smith, and his wife, a very good woman painter named “Irene Rice Ferrera”, an important emergent pure abstractionist named Burgoyne Diller.... And... this also was something of a nucleus of the beginning of the American abstract artists. We were all friends from that time...on. So here I am, drawing from nature, but already, in a sense Cubisizing it, or Cubing it; but anyway being very, very concerned with form and composition. Next....

SLIDE

This is a painting I made in 1931... the next—the following year. I was still studying with... Matulka; it’s very much influenced by him. Matulka had an exhibition at the Whitney I guess about a year and a half ago; and some of you might remember the paintings show there.... He had been influenced by Picasso. He had been in Paris off and on, in the 1920’s.... The point is it’s kind of a *mélange* of... you know—little Picasso, a little Braque; and then... a little Matulka also. I consider the time not so bad. How old was I then? Maybe twenty-three or twenty-four.... Okay, next.

SLIDE

All right. Now, I should have a slide in between here.... That is... that Matulka really did not have a good grip on the foundations of modern art. Nor did the others. In the 1920’s there was a

very important magazine published in Paris called the *Cahier d'Art*; and we used to buy it, you know, in 1927, 1928, 1929, and so forth and so forth.... And to a great extent we were trying to interpret what modern art was... in terms of the... finished art of Picasso and the others. And increasingly I felt that I wasn't doing my own work. One of the main points I try to convey to my students is the concept of authenticity. As far as I'm concerned, if it doesn't come from inside, if you don't have that feeling of rightness... of inner rightness about what you're doing, it's pretty much a sign that something is seriously wrong. So in the summer of 1932, I started to work realistically—I started to do realistic drawings. I wish I had—I wish I had one of those here to show you... because this drawing was made after I began to study with Hofmann. Hofmann came to New York in 1932. Now if he hadn't come to New York, it's entirely possible that I would not have continued with modern art. It's entirely possible that I would have become a Social Realist painter. You have to realize that in the 1930's it was Social Realism which was the dominant kind of art. And then a reactionary art, given by Benton and others whom we call the America-firsters, a kind of narrow-minded, parochial art coming from the Midwest. But anyway, Hofmann did come; and Hofmann gave me what I had been missing in the previous years. And that is he gave me a sound basis for modern art—Not modern art in terms of originality, or... modernity, or being with it, or any of that nonsense; but really in a structural sense. And particularly in terms of... making an abstraction through space. This was his great, great contribution. Seems to me that this contribution has now been pretty much lost.... I've been trying to explain to my students—you—that I see three kinds of space. I see Renaissance space, which is given in a very fixed way by perspective. You know, there are things that are near to you; and then they get smaller as they recede from you. Everything has its place. And that kind of space more or less dominated Western art from about 1450 until about 1850, roughly. And then strange things began to happen. Impressionism came into being; and then more important the art of Cezanne, when... space, real space, tangible space, phenomenal space was experienced... but then it was transformed into two-dimensional painting space. This is what Hofmann gave us; and it was an enormously significant contribution. Now, in the last twenty years or so, there's a new kind of space, which can be called in a certain sense, non-tangible space; or self-referential space. And when I said before that I fell off the art wagon in 1960, that's a little bit what the situation is about my understanding the new space. It's very hard for me to understand non-tactile space, very, very difficult. So what you see here is a kind of

moving backward and forward, where the background comes out, and maybe certain planes which were in the foreground go backward. But however the space was experienced, it was—the aim was to bring it into... two dimensions-- the two-dimensionality of modern painting, of which you may have heard so much—and I think... which has been misinterpreted so much. Okay, next.

SLIDE

Now these are two drawings made in the period like 1932/1935. Okay, next.

SLIDE

Now you're all very quiet. And I'm letting you get away with it. And I would appreciate it very much if you'd break in, just be friendly. You know, you can (laughing) say something like, "Did you have a nice day?" or (laughter) Or "Did you take the slides *yourself*?" (laughter) or *any* goddamned thing; but don't sit there like statues, please.

Question: Are these all recent slides? Have you taken all these slides recently?

Speaker: Yes, I took the slides myself, yes. And I--

Question: Recently?

Speaker: ...Over—no, no—over a period of many years. I can bring that in right now. I was making a mural for the WPA in 1937/38; and I kept changing it. Like a complete Dumbo-- it was a big mural, like ten feet high by twenty feet wide—I treated it like an easel painting. I kept changing it; you know, kept changing, changing, changing, changing; and I thought, I should have a record of what's going on. So I got into photography around 1937... and that's just when Kodachrome came into existent. Now I think you think that the cavemen had color photography. (laughter) But color photography is relatively recent. So I learned to photograph at that time; and I can't tell you how important I think it is in terms of record keeping. I mean I've tried very hard to work at it; I haven't been that much successful. But I've done better than I would have if I hadn't known how to make the slides. Some of these I've made recently, and some of them I made thirty years ago. Anyway, this is the kind of painting I was making at that time, '34, I guess... and I want the students to see what I've been talking to you about; and that is... I'll be

coming up pretty soon with free painting. The truth is I was a pretty fixed painter, pretty much of a strict form painter until I was about forty-two years old; that is, until about 1950. In a sense this is a hard-edge painting... done from nature—very important, done from nature.... So this was my thinking at the beginning. But it's also true that I could make those free paintings, like I showed you with the watercolor, earlier; anytime I wanted to make a free painting, I could do it. And that's an interesting point. During the 1930's I could turn on—I could turn off this kind of painting and make a free painting. Now when I look back and I see the slides of the work, I think to myself, how could it have been that I didn't have a nervous breakdown? How could it have been that I didn't think I was vacillating? The point is I didn't think about it; and I've been trying to say that to the students: Don't worry too much about your future. Yes.

Question: When you say that this is not a free painting, does that mean that you planned out your palette before you started?

Speaker: No, no, I'm glad you—See it's very important if you ask questions. It was not a pre-composed painting; but it was a painting composed in the act of painting; like I was trying to regularize nature as it was before me. So I didn't do any pre-planning whatsoever. It's as though I was using the same approach of Cezanne; but carrying the premise further in the sense of abstraction.

Question: Did you draw this pencil?

Speaker: No, no, I didn't draw it at all; no, no I didn't draw it at all; I went right into the painting, like you see it here. And... another concept that Hofmann gave me, and gave the others, of course, was the idea of perfect form, which I've already given to my students here, those that I've had. And that is that other things being equal, a work of art should be perfect in the sense that you can't add anything to it, nor can you subtract... anything from it. And that led to the concept of going toward perfect form. And then what you might call *necessary* form.

Everything had to work in the composition. So it wasn't pre-planned... in the sense that many abstractionists worked in that period, like Juan Gris. I worked straight from nature, and... evolved the painting, but—this is a rigorous painting. A painting like this might have taken me four weeks to make. It's a small painting, about sixteen by twenty. Now that's something else that I'd like to get across to you. No one made big paintings in this period, no one. If you saw

the show of Gorky... at the Guggenheim, there were just a few big paintings; and those were surely made in the 1940's. And the—Go ahead.

Question: Could you say something about those two, grey, linear forms in the lower right hand—

Speaker: Yes, I could say something very apt—a mistake. (laughter) That has bothered me ever since I made it, because it's a three-dimensional form stuck into a two-dimensional concept.

You all get that?

Audience: No...

Speaker: I hadn't absorbed the three-dimensional concept; and it has always bothered me.

Question: How do you like this painting now? Do you like it, or do you dislike it, or... how do you feel about it?

Speaker: It's sort of medium... Consider—I consider it now something of a goody-goody painting. (laughter) You know what I mean? Like "A for effort." (laughter) But... but you can't understand the state of the culture at that time... And something else comes out in something of an historical context.... And that is that Hofmann stopped painting from about 1915 to 1931... or '32. He had been drawing in that period.... Maybe a little bit later—'33, I guess.... He had been drawing all through the period, but not painting. And I think to a very great extent Hofmann's painting developed also in relation to the students that he had at that time. Hofmann was not a painter-teacher; he was a *drawing*-teacher; so although this seems quite dull, and I wish that right hand corner weren't there... considering everything, it's not bad for the time. But anyway, quickly, next.

SLIDE

Yes. Loud, please.

Question: Do you think you're striving to make the perfect form... always, or just in this particular painting?

Speaker: Yes.

Question: Always?

Speaker: Yes, what's the question?

Question: The question being... in nature you only seem to get perfect forms which then move on to being imperfect. Why would you want to fix something—

Speaker: Yeah, but what I was trying to do was get a perfect form on the canvas, from all kinds of imperfect forms seen in nature. And I wanted to regularize it; I wanted to capture it. In other words, out of a certain amount of chaos, which all through nature, I wanted to derive a perfect form. And also, in a certain way, keep it, capture it.

Question: What was in this painting, or the still life in your painting?

Speaker: Yeah. (laughter) What's the question?

Question: What was in the still life when you painted your—

Speaker: It's not a still life! (laughter)

Question: No, I mean, are there two bottles, and what else?

Speaker: The bottles, what else?

Question: Yeah.

Speaker: Well what you see in the front here is something like an apple... Something like apples; it was a real dopy still life. It wasn't necessary to (laughter drowns end of sentence). This painting I consider to *better* than the one I just showed you. The point is, if I continued in this way, I would have been a relatively cold painter, something like Juan Gris—and maybe there's a little bit of Juan Gris here. And there was another mistake that I made... in the 1930's... I swear I didn't see any difference between a painter like Soutine... and a painter like Mondrian. To me there was—it was only modern art... and I would like study Mondrian, and I would study Soutine as though I were studying the same material. Actually they were going in opposite directions. They were contradictory to each other. And an aesthetic which was genuine for Mondrian was invalid for Soutine. I've only realized that in the last twenty years or so. But

anyway.... Now this painting is also faulted in the background because again I have a three-dimensional form. Do you see that? Like something is in the background, and it's quite three-dimensional? I hadn't brought the two dimensions.... But the next painting is important. Next, please.

SLIDE

Yes, sir.

Question: Was Mondrian's work respected?

Speaker: Very much by a small group of artists. Very much so. And we knew about him... we knew about about him from the *Cahier d'Art* magazine; and we also knew about him from the exhibitions in the Museum of Modern Art. (pause) Foreign art was respected; American art was passed over. All right, all right—I was twenty-seven when I made this in 1935, and it's my first painting—my first real painting. It's *my* painting. And I realized it at the time. It's made from space; it's made from pure space—I had a still life; but it's a spatially organized abstraction... in what you might call *the new space*. The new object is space. And here pretty much everything takes its place; and pretty much everything is two-dimensional. If you look carefully you can see something like a flowerpot on the right over here—Yes, a flowerpot. This is some kind of a piece of fruit... and that might be a box over there... but (unintelligible) you called, this painting is mine. Like without any influence *that I know of*, from any artist. So I was twenty-seven. It's not bad to find yourself when you're twenty-seven, not bad.

Question: Was there any—

Speaker: Go ahead, loud.

Question: Any kind of surreal—

Speaker: Nothing! Nothing, nothing! (laughter) When I was in a bind, in 1932, because I didn't understand what I was doing... and I knew it wasn't me... and I started to go back to realism...

I... played with surrealism. I don't have any of the work, but I remember it; I played with surrealism a little bit. In the main surrealism was a dirty word... in the whole group of artists whom I've been talking about—the American abstract...artists. Now remember that in the 1930's Rothko was a Social Realist; Pollock was painting... tigers; (laughs) and... *Benton*—He was painting Bentons... Bentons... really backward American painting. Let me see... Kline was painting National Academy paintings.... These people surfaced around 1950... roughly. Yes sir, loud.

Question: You said that the...the space is flat? But I feel like there's definitely things in front of other things, that there's depth....

Speaker: Yes. Yeah, yes, yes, yes, yes. I hope they compensate; I hope they compensate with each other. I was trying to have space there; I wanted to have the planes—some planes be in front, and some planes backward. But here... from this painting, you can see that I have ambiguity of space.... For example... this plane over here, that whitish plane there... wasn't much forward... This is some kind of a vase... Actually...I did the same thing here ... I think it's like a little bit of a hole... a little bit negative... But you can't tell from this the physical objective placements of the space. Now the whole problem of three-dimensional experience, and two-dimensional representations is a rough one. It was the biggest problem that conventional artists had to face as they were moving from traditional Renaissance art to modern art... very difficult. I was (unintelligible), really; so I moved into this kind of art, abstract art, pretty easily. Next.

SLIDE

Okay. Now... another stroke of luck was that the WPS started in 1935. I was twenty-seven. Now this is a little bit late for what I'm talking about; but... important as it is for you to have a good art education, like from the time you're eighteen, until maybe twenty-three, even twenty-four—whatever it is—four to six years... really the five years after that is more important. Like when you learn to *found* yourself—not find yourself, found yourself, f-o-u-n-d.... develop resources of your own away from your teachers. Whether you can do that is very critical, let's

say in the period from twenty-five to thirty. This is where we should have some kind of a loan process—a loan for what we have today... where you can borrow money—you know, very limited sums of money, like six thousand dollars a year... and then repay it over a long, long period of time. (laughter, applause) And... I can't tell you how lucky I was to have these five years on the project, from the time I was twenty-seven to thirty-two. And this enabled me to go ahead and do my own work—you know, day by day, week by week, and so forth.... Now, I was on what's called the Mural Project; and this is a sketch for an abstract mural, made in 1937—pretty much hard-edge painting, isn't it? Yeah. So you can see what I'm talking about. Every part of this composition is very, very carefully placed... very carefully considered, with that concept of perfection that I was talking to you about before—perfect form. Okay, next.

SLIDE

Question: How big is that?

Speaker: How big is it?

Question: Yes.

Speaker: How big is the sketch?

Question: How big is this?

Speaker: Very tiny. Maybe twelve by twenty, something like that—twelve by twenty, twelve inches by twenty inches. Okay, now I was doing free painting like this at the same time... blithely, stupidly, with no sense of contradiction. My favorite saying is that God takes care of drunks, fools, and artists. (laughter) So I just went along... week by week. Okay...next.

SLIDE

Now this is about 1939... and pretty much I had found my style. And I could have gone along and painted like this... but before developing that thought—In other words again, you see it's... more or less pure abstraction; but a small painting, maybe twenty by twenty-four; and it's not larger than twenty-four by thirty. Now one of the miracles of projection is something small like that is blown up, and takes on a certain kind of impressive character when it's blown up. Okay... let's see the next painting.

SLIDE

Question: What's the medium the medium on that last painting.

Speaker: Oil... it was oil, but with some sand... in the painting, and that's why it looks a little bit queer. Now Sidney mentioned about Cuba. So here's another... example of my ambivalence. For some reason or other, which I will never know...and which my wife can't explain either, I went off the Project of my own will in 1940. I think as hard as I can, to gain some insight as to why I did it. I can't imagine why I left the Project, but I did. And I went down to Cuba for four months; that was the end of... 1939, and the beginning of 1940. And I responded then, again blithely—you know, I turned off the abstraction, and I turned on what you might call an Expressionist style. (laughs) Really... so it helps to be stupid, huh? (laughter) But anyway... anyway, I made these dance paintings, which was made, I'm quite sure, in 1940. Anyway, it helps the point I'm going to make next. Let's have the next slide.

SLIDE

This is a painting which I just made... in the Spring. It's again a dance piece... so... somehow in my unconscious, somehow in the depth of my psyche, I was prefiguring in 1940 what I was going to do in 1982. Let's go back again.

PREVIOUS SLIDE

Not so different from the... painting which I just made a few months ago...-- Except in the size. The size of the preceding one is sixteen by twenty or twenty by twenty-four; I'm not sure— Twenty by twenty-four I guess—And this maybe is six feet by six and a half...feet. But this is my... my recent work, more of which I'll be showing you a little later on. Okay, let's pick up the thread now again.

SLIDE

Question: Was there anything else in Cuba that you—

Speaker: Was there anything what?

Question: Else in Cuba that you went there for... Like wasn't there a lot of mobsters hanging around?

Speaker: No... No... (laughter) Absolutely nothing... except that it was easy to get there, in terms of it being a foreign country. But otherwise I can't figure it out. I drove down to Key West, and left my car there; and took the boat over to Havana.

Question: There were a lot of nightclubs... (microphone backfeed)

Speaker: There were a lot of what?

Question: Night... nightclubs...

Speaker: I don't know if there were a lot of night...nightclubs but there were a lot. I—I—But I found some. (laughter) But anyway... But anyway, the life was very rich... and very colorful, of course, because it was the sunny... tropics. Now there's an interesting story there, too. And that is I made friends, particularly with two artists. One was named Portocarrero.... Gosh! What's the other fellow's name? Well, maybe I'll think of it a little bit later... Anyway Portocarrero... And they were both as pure as—as poor... as pure *and poor* as church mice; they didn't have a nickel. Now Portocarrero is the leading painter of Cuba; and the other fellow... is the Secretary

of a trade union—of the Artists' Trade Union there. In other words, he's a leading figure in the government as far as art is concerned. I often think I could go back there; but I'm afraid of the political angle... because of the... intense ill feeling—and justified—that the Cubans have... vis a vis the Americans. Okay, the latest painting I showed you was 1940; and then... everything went wrong. The war started in... 1941; but even before the war started there was conscription.... Someone like Jim Brooks, I think, was already in the Army in 1940.... I got into war work for three years, from 1940 until 1943. And then I was in the Navy for three years... so I lost six years completely. But it wasn't only that. I didn't realize it at the time... but I didn't really find myself maybe until 1948 or 1950. See, once again it exemplifies how I never had any great introspection. As far as I know I was discharged from the Navy on a Monday night, and I was in my studio on Tuesday morning, cleaning it up. You know... like I didn't have any qualms like, "Oh my God, how can I pick up?" I just went there like any dumbbell... (laughter) and started to work. But it turns out that I lost... really about eight years in the 1940's. I once knew somebody who lived in Brooklyn for two years, and he always took two years off his age... and I often thought that I could do that also, in relation to this period. You're supposed to laugh at but we won't (laughter) have any... We won't talk about that. Now... the point about this is that I don't know when I made it. It's interesting; I either made it in 1944, or I made it in 1946; I don't know. But I was stationed in New York for a while... and living at home... and I used to go home and make collages. So I don't know when this was made. This is cut paper, and... watercolor. Very small... eleven inches by fourteen inches. Next.

SLIDE

Question: Mr. McNeil....

Speaker: Yes?

Question: Did your experience in the military affect your in the military affect your work any?

Speaker: I think it hurt.... But I don't know. It hurt it almost for sure, but I don't know....

Question: In what way?

Speaker: Well I just lost six years out of my life, for God's sake. It's a long, long time. Okay, now this also I don't know whether it's 1943 or 1946. But you can see I'm working in a little kind of freedom, compared to those other highly composed paintings which I showed you a short time ago. Next, please.

SLIDE

Also very small, eleven by fourteen. Now...I'm thirty-eight years old now. It's 1946. And I had—I had led a very kind of polyglot life.... Before I was in the Project I had lousy jobs, like being a house painter... being an elevator operator... and that kind of... rotten job; but I can tell you I was very glad to have them. That was a depth of the Depression, between... 1930 and 1935. And then I got on to the Project, and the point is the Project is now glamorized; you know, it's as though you went to Eton... or to Harrow... and you had the old school tie.... “Oh, you were on the Project. Oh, tell me about that! How lovely, how wonderful!” (laughter) The fact is we were on welfare.... The fact is... this was made work. So I didn't find myself really until I was... thirty-eight; and then I had lost the years in the war work, and in the Navy. Scrubbing decks is not exactly reinforcing. So I got a job teaching at the University of Laramie—The University of Wyoming, in Laramie—in 1936. Something else! This thing of showing slides is relatively a recent development. In many ways it's very poignant... because it's as though your whole life stretches out before you.... Now I knew I had these paintings... but I never put them together, and I never looked at them in this way until this year. And when I look at this... I think to myself, I could have made my whole life... out in the West, couldn't I? I could have been a landscape painter of a certain kind, and not the worst! Yes? It's not the worst landscape painting. (laughter) Someone (laughing) said it's not the best, either. (laughter) But anyway... But anyway... it's not bad painting...for 1946. And... I have certain feelings about it; it's genuine to me. But I was very lonesome... I remember reading about my friends in New York having exhibitions... and I would feel gloomy, (laughing) looking out at the cattle... (laughter) And then, by the greatest luck, I got a job back in New York, in 1948, where I went to teach at Pratt. Next, please. This also is a landscape I made in... Wyoming, either '46 or '47... or '48—

I don't know. But I like these paintings. As far as I'm concerned they're rich. And I could have made my whole life being a Western landscape... painter. Now remember there was no—There was still no place for modern art, as far America was concerned. This was simply tolerated, and I only got the job there because a friend of mine was already teaching there. Okay, next.

SLIDE

All right, now I'm back in New York, and I'm painting abstractions like this... It's about 1948. Next.

SLIDE

Same... same kind of abstraction. Again, some time...1948. Next, please.

SLIDE

Again, same thing. Same period. Sort of hard-edge abstraction, sort of pure abstraction. Probably not made from nature. Probably not. Maybe started from nature. Next, please.

SLIDE

Okay, now... I made the point before... that that one painting in 1935 was very important to me. *This* painting is important to me. It's coming out dark; the slide is not good. It's a normal painting.... But this is the *best* of the pure paintings I made in the Thirties and the Forties. This was definitely made from nature... definitely made from nature. Definitely made from a still life; and if you could study the painting you'd see how I painted in and painted out... and worked a very long time... on this painting. So... this is very much a form painting. And it's very much a space abstraction painting—a *space* abstraction painting... where I was working in terms of the space movements that I saw in front of me. Okay, next, please.

SLIDE

About '49... still very formal. Next, please.

SLIDE

Now... these are the paintings which I... showed—I think the painting before and this one I probably showed in my first show at the Egan Gallery. I was then forty-two years old... and it wouldn't be unnatural for a painter to have a show—a first show—when he was forty. It's true I had the show in Havana when I was thirty-two; but that again was as much luck as anything. This was really my first show—first one-man show—when I was forty-two years old. Again a small painting.... This one maybe twenty-four by thirty. Next, please. More or less the same... about 1950. The painting's getting a little bit freer... 1950. I—No, hold that painting. I now started to develop something which I only know about in retrospect; I wasn't conscious of it at the time. But do you see how I have a central configuration which could be called a figure in the large sense? Do you see how I have a configuration there? --An image in the center which is pretty marked? This is going to recur again and again. I was not conscious of it then. I'm only conscious of it in retrospect. Next.

SLIDE

Somewhat the same there; I have a figure in the center, and then other elements around it...

Question: What's the title of the one before this?

Speaker: Now...now the titles. The titles to me... are simply handles; and I simply can't—I can't tell you what the titles are; I don't know what the titles are. I wait until the work is finished; and then I name it. It's like having a kid. (laughter) Now... I sometimes get... pinched when I look at the painting, and then I give it a title. But I don't know what the titles of these are... You know... sort of dumb titles like... (long pause) like "Color Abstraction Number 12," or something like that. (laughter)

Question: Do you have any children?

Speaker: Do I have any children? Yes. Two monsters. (laughter) Okay, next.

SLIDE

I have a daughter thirty-nine, and a son thirty-three. Now... this is what my studio looks like...now. And speaking of monsters, here they are also. And I—I show you this view of my studio because, around this time, '52/'53, I changed my way of working, and I... have, since then, worked with the paintings flat on the floor. I haven't used an easel since this time; and I find it very effective, because I walk around the painting, and the painting has no top, no bottom... and thereby I am able to treat it as complete form, complete abstraction. This is the type of painting I'm doing now. All right, next.

SLIDE

Question: (unintelligible)

Speaker: Yes, louder... See... I keep saying loud because I don't hear so well. Go ahead.

Question: Do you paint from life now?

Speaker: No. No, I worked from nature religiously, from the time I got started—You know, like when I was an art student, in 1927... until about 1970.... And...in those years, like 1970, I set up the still life in the Fall and kept it there all year... and started my paintings from that still life. And the next September I would tear down the old one and put up a new one. But I always—*always* started my work... from nature.... And then what happened is that I began to use nature less and less. But it was only about four years ago that I told myself, "It's sort of silly of me to set up a still life when I wasn't using it that much." So it's only in the last four to five years that I haven't done works from nature at all. And what I like to think is that now, after all these decades, I want to pull what I have in me... out. I don't want to get any new experience; I don't want any new trouble, (laughter) or new stimulation... or anything like that. I would like to think that I would... sort of... essence everything that I've... learned previously. I don't want to (unintelligible)now.

Question: Do you have some... portraits up here?

Speaker: In the last one?

Question: In the last one...

Speaker: Yeah, the portraits I make up. Yeah... It's (laughs) unkind... (laughter) Oh, yeah, in that slide there's a little bit (unintelligible)... I'll have my students all at once. The last meeting... and I want to explain to them that that's because... it's good insurance; and I wanted to lose them all at once. (laughter) Well I'll show you then how I don't paint conventionally, like you do, squeezing your color from itty bitty tubes... and painting with itty bitty brushes. (laughter) But rather... I keep the colors in cups. And in each cup I keep a brush. Sometimes the brush is one inch wide; sometimes they're one and a half; sometimes... two inches. And then I mix any colors which I want to mix on the painting proper. I only use a palette to touch up sometimes... and then I use an itty bitty brush. But a lot of my work—my work is what you might call a large approach to painting, and I haven't the slightest doubt that that came from Pollock. Haven't the slightest doubt about that. I mean Pollock was a monumental influence on me. (unintelligible word) As far as helping painters free themselves from that kind of pure form, which I've found constricting. Very important.

Question: Mr. McNeil?

Speaker: Yes?

Question: It seems to me that to change from painting still to the figure is a big change in terms of subject matter. Could you say something about that?

Speaker: Yeah. Yeah. Hold on a minute; we'll come out (unintelligible) Okay. Next slide.

SLIDE

Question: Mr. McNeil?

Speaker: Okay, hold it! Hold it, hold it! Yes?

Question: Do you still work with oil—

Speaker: Wait a minute now. The question is a good one. All the questions are good. This is a very practical one. Mostly I work with oil... In my last exhibition I think I had twelve paintings... and I had one acrylic. And... I am now going to acrylics more and more. And I think if I live long enough, I'll be painting entirely in acrylics. But I'm very much more at home in oil. Almost any painter my age is—or even approaching my age is. And Milton Resnick was here a short time ago, and he paints in oil, does he not?

Answer: Yes.

Speaker: Yes?

Answer (several voices): Yes.

Speaker: Yeah... yeah. Yeah, like the advantage of acrylic is so great, to have a painting dry in a half an hour is so wonderful... so marvelous. And I think an alternative too. So... I'm very gradually moving from oil to acrylic; and it may be that if I have my next exhibition and I have *fifteen* paintings, I might then have *three* acrylics, or four acrylics. I'll point out the acrylics at the end, when I come to my recent paintings. Now... I made the point about two paintings, that I considered them important to my development. And this one I consider very important. And this is what I meant by poignancy before... I have only one painting like this; this is 1954. I have only one painting. I wish I had made twenty like this. I think it's a good painting. And I don't understand why didn't make... well, five... well, eight. It's about forty—forty by forty-eight—so heavy you can hardly lift it. Maybe it weighs forty pounds, with all the paint that's on it. All through these years I was known to be a heavy impasto painter... who's now painting

quite thin... quite thin. Also done from a still life—no question about it. And also a space abstraction—no question about it. Next.

SLIDE

The same thing... This is about... '53 or '54... and I'm just making... abstractions. But this painting happens to be sideways. It should that that part should be up—my fault! My fault! I put the slides in. But if it were there... again we would have that central figure I was talking about.

Question: Would you like me to change it?

Speaker: No, no, no; it's not necessary. (laughs) But here is again a central figure. Okay, next.

SLIDE

Small painting, maybe bigger, but not that big—forty by forty-eight. Same with this one, about forty by forty-eight. And *again* something of a figure in the center. Next one please.

SLIDE

This I consider an important painting also; the world didn't. (laughter) Now can you see also there's a kind of a figure in that, in the large sense of configuration? Do you see what I mean by a... kind of... archetypal figure, maybe? There's an image there, a type of one... Do you see that there's an image, which has something like leaves coming out there on the right? Now in this case the title means something—*Nike, Nike...*

Question: How do you say?

Speaker: Greek for... winged...creatures—winged beings. Though in this case the... title has a little significance. 1956. Go ahead, next.

SLIDE

Now here the figure's all clear, isn't it? Very clear, the configuration... that—in the center there... Now I'm getting into big paintings. This is about... sixty-four by eighty, maybe; in other words, almost seven feet on this dimension.... Next.

SLIDE

You notice how the paintings are free style? —almost everything I've showed you are free style... Can you see then how distanced I am from you when you work the neutral space? The post-1960 space? These paintings—many are like rocks.... All right, now the figure's very clear, isn't it? The figure's sort of got the candle in its hand? Yes? Yeah! The point is... I was working toward a figure... without knowing that I was working toward a figure. And this answers the questions put a few minutes ago... I'm now on the verge of *real* figures.... But I did not premeditate this decision at all. And it seems to me that this happens again and again and again in creativity... that you know what you want to do after you have done it.

Question: George?

Speaker: Yes.

Question: Is it not true the figure is a very recognizable... object which can simply occur... like a blot on the wall. I mean a painter's got to keep it *out* of an abstract painting, but...

Speaker: It's better to keep it out, you say?

Question: No. I said, isn't it easy—

Speaker: See, I don't think that way; I don't think that way. I tried to explain to the students, in relation to what they showed me, that I see through subject matter. I don't see subject matter.

Question: But as soon as you get a blob it's a head....

Speaker: I don't see heads!

Question: A lot of people see heads in Cezanne...skies.

Speaker: Yeah, I know; I know someone who sees heads in... (laughs)(laughter) Cezanne skies. (laughing) You know someone who really clearly sees them... My point is... I make—I make the figuration from abstraction. And when I look at nature, like a still life, I see it in terms of abstract potential. I see it in terms of space/form potentials. So I never see a head that's a head. I never see a stain on the wall as a stain on the wall. I'm not saying it's right; it's the way I see it.

Question: George?

Speaker: Yes.

Question: Can you talk a little more about the new new space, and what that—some examples maybe?

Speaker: No, I'm not talking about it.

Question: Okay.

Speaker: I just talked about it. (laughs)(laughter)

Question: Could you give us an example—

Speaker: A little bit of what “Cartier” does.... You know “Cartier's” work? Yeah? A little bit of what “Cartier” does. But more or less the space comes in terms of internal references—

brushstrokes and what's—whatsoever. But I don't know... I don't know everything.... Was it...someone else... said something? Okay, next.

SLIDE

That painting's pretty big also.... I think six feet by six feet, or near to that. Okay, this slide is (unintelligible, sounds like shadow or shallow); that's 1960, and...as you see, I'm working backward and forward. This is pretty much a pure abstraction... done from nature, always done from nature; but now the figures will start coming out more and more. Next.

SLIDE

Question: What do you mean “done by—from nature?”

Speaker: Wait I have to back; he had a question. Go ahead again.

Question: What do you mean when you say they were done from nature?

Speaker: A still life....

Question: There was something said—

Speaker: Anything outside me is nature.

Question: Were you looking at something while you painted them?

Speaker: Yeah, yeah, all the time, yeah. This one too. I would make a start... and then I would abstract what I saw.... At a certain point the painting itself would take over....

Question: So isn't that an internal reference then?

Speaker: No.... not really...no...no....

Question: But it's you reacting to... what you... to the paint on the surface.

Speaker: No...no... I'm very dated; I'm very close to Cezanne. Cezanne is the biggest influence in my life. I'm very close to tangible space... tactile space... But then transformed into two

dimensions. I've said before, it's a very difficult concept; it is... very difficult to get. And most of it's lost... mostly the people of my generation are going... and... that concept will go, also. It doesn't make any difference. Okay, now here's a figure I made pretty clear, yes? Some people saw that as something like a crucifixion... in this figure. A big painting... or a *fairly* big painting, maybe five feet by six feet. Next.

SLIDE

(laughter)

Comment: Is that thing a landscape?

Speaker: Yeah, all—many of my paintings look like landscapes... many of them, many of them.... And that's because landscapes almost intrinsically are abstract, aren't they? Aren't landscape almost intrinsically *non-objective*? Can you keep—Can you touch a cloud? (pause) All right. Now this is sort of a thicket, isn't it? A reclining thicket? Next please.

Question: George, your pictures came out of the landscape painting?

Speaker: Came out of abstraction. It came out of abstraction; where I must have had some kind of an inner impulse to figurize or figure the work so as to give it psychological significance. I was getting tired probably of working abstractly; and I wanted to have something which was more... human. I never thought about it at the time; it just developed by itself. But here it's pretty clear, isn't it? It's a big painting. Next, please.

SLIDE

Question: How big?

Speaker: How big? ...Seventy-two by seventy-eight, or six by six and a half... Another one... The figure is pretty clear in the center. These are about '63. Next, please.

SLIDE

Okay. Now this is quite different from the work I was showing you before, isn't it? I wasn't aware that I had made a change in 1963, until I saw these slides. A friend of mine, about six

months ago said, “You were doing some pretty rough figures in the Sixties;” and I thought to myself, “What do you mean, rough figures in the Sixties? I can’t remember any rough figures in the Sixties.” But I made a decisive change in 1963; and I wasn’t aware of it at all. Next.

SLIDE

One of my best paintings... Okay, about ’67, I think. A big painting, again six by six foot and a half. Couldn’t be more of figure, really, in terms of abstraction. Next, please.

SLIDE

Again one of my best paintings, at around the same time... ‘67/’68.... Next.

SLIDE

Question: But you were not aware that you were making figures at this point?

Speaker: Yes, at this point I was.... Yeah, very clearly, very clearly....

Comment: Yeah. Good. (laughter)

Speaker: Yeah, but I wasn’t aware around ‘60/’63; and I wasn’t aware that grotesquerie entered my work around ’63. This is 1970. That’s... *grotesquerie*—you know, distorted images... distorted faces and so forth. Next.

SLIDE

About... forty by forty-eight, I’d say.... Okay, now this is... 1971, I think... and how old am I? I’m sixty-three. And I think now... I come to the best painting I can do. I mean, whatever it is, it’s the best painting I can do. Next, please.

SLIDE

Question: Mr. McNeil?

Speaker: Yes.

Question: Do you feel as though you've reached perfection? (laughter) Or are you still searching?

Speaker: Well, see... the perfection is... misunderstood. When I use the term perfection, I didn't mean the most perfect *art*; I meant that at any given moment I wanted to achieve the most perfect form I could. For example... I wanted to squeeze all the fat out of the form, so that it would be absolutely essence; and that nothing would be in the form that didn't have to be in the form to help the expressiveness. I didn't think of it in terms of making a perfect work of art; that would have been a great misunderstanding. Perfect, in my effort; and, when working from a still life, you see certain movements there, and you're trying to capture those movements. So I was trying to perfect my experience; that's what I mean by... a perfect form.... Where I had gotten every bit of composition out of it I could possibly have gotten out of it; that's what I mean. I didn't slump off anything. Every square inch was as important as every other square inch. That's what I mean by a perfect form. Okay, I'm that came up, because it brings up something else. As I have been going along now... this is about 1971... the work has gotten more Expressionistic; I don't know if you... are catching it. And there's... there's a contradiction between the search for a perfect form and Expressionistic art. There's a real basic contradiction. Now I don't give a *damn* about that kind of perfect form which motivated me up until this period. It must have been at some time like this that I began to think about the concept of perfect form as being like perfect grammar, like where everything's so well organized... every comma, you know, in it's correct place; and then maybe the art gets a little bit *cold*. So it's around this time that I sort of... tried to get out of my mind these concepts about...perfect form, and I began to work more spontaneously. It didn't take so long to make the pictures.... And I've been thinking like that; but nevertheless that concept of perfect of form is within me, as I'll show a bit later. It's here; it's in here.... I can't think of the exact word—circumstantial! There's nothing which doesn't really make (unintelligible) here; and you'll see it, through all my work. While they're pretty, there's a lot of form seen here... underneath it. Next.

SLIDE

Question: Mr. McNeil?

Speaker: Yes.

Question: Do you start with a... pretty good idea of what the painting is going to look like?

Speaker: No. Just the opposite...just the opposite. I have what you might call an unfolding approach to composition... and ongoing approach to composition, where I don't know what's going to evolve; I don't know at all. I take beginning—I usually take beginnings from a still life, like move it here, move it there, and so forth. And then I would see how that would evolve. I've been thinking a long time about what you might call the poetic premise of painting, which is evocation. How can you evoke forms? *Evoke* them.... That's my technique. Now in 1970 I started to make it lithographs; and you'll see my work will get more graphic year by year. But I haven't made it with a lithograph now for a year and a half or so, but... more or less I worked very hard at lithography; had my own press; did my own printing... from 1970 to 1981. Next.

SLIDE

Okay... 1971... Next.

SLIDE

A lithograph, 1973... I guess—or '72. This is what I mean by grotesquerie. Next.

SLIDE

Another lithograph... You know, small.... Twenty-two by twenty-eight inches. Comes up quite effective large, huh?

Question: Do you use...liquid touché?

Speaker: Liquid touché... God knows how I made that... (laughter) No, I don't think so; I think I used crayon. But interestingly, all those white spots that you see were where a film that I put down picked up. You know what I mean, picked up? Should have stayed there... and the white (laughs) shouldn't have come through; but I think it's *better* with the white coming through. I'm pretty good now at printing; but I haven't printed in a year and a half. Next. Oh, wait a minute! Hold this a minute. Go back. I like this because so mucho of the shop lithography that you see now looks as though it was—looks as though it came from an immaculate conception. (laughter) As though no hand had every touched the lithograph. Okay, next.

SLIDE

All right... now in 18—in 1871, yeah, that was a long time ago! (laughter) Now... in 1971 I'm starting to work more freely; and this painting is sort of important. I made it in about three days, and I couldn't get over it (laughter)—Like how did it happen? How could I make a painting in three days? Three months would be more like it. Next.

SLIDE

Another lithograph... '74, I think. Next.

SLIDE

'75... I had a show—Oh, I should tell you... that I didn't have any gallery between 1967 and 1977; that's eleven years... The best years of my life... from the time I was fifty-nine until I was sixty-nine. The best years of a painter's life. I didn't have a gallery. But I did manage to have exhibitions. In '73 I had an exhibition at the Pratt Manhattan Center; and that evoked some interest. But then I had a show at a gallery in New York which has just gone out of existence, called the Landmark Gallery. And that was a kind of an artists' gallery. And that show was... important for me. I only sold one watercolor from the exhibition, so it was a flop in that sense; but people saw the show, to my great surprise. I didn't get any publicity at all, not one review; and I didn't get any... bite from any other gallery... but people saw the show in spite of everything. And this painting was in the show...

Question: Who bought the watercolor?

Speaker: What's that?

Question: Who bought the watercolor?

Speaker: Who bought it?

Question: Yeah.

Speaker: Well, that's interesting; a foundation bought it, called Ciba-Geigy—you know, the pharmaceutical people? And there's a man there named Lowell, who's a quite wonderful guy... has a good eye... And he has helped them form a very good collection. Next.

SLIDE

Same time... like 1974/75... Again, in my Landmark show. Now what I mean by composition... Do you see how the green on the right goes in between the legs there? Do you see how this is really an abstract painting? It's a *figured* abstract painting; it's a *configured* abstract painting. This is true of all my work. Next, please.

SLIDE

A lithograph done in '75.... Next, please.

SLIDE

'75—1975... A very heavy painting. And this one did not come through easily; it took me a very long time to make it.

Question: Could you say something about the... the square format?

Speaker: The square format, yes. Yes, it's interesting that you noticed it. (pause) When I started to work with the canvases on the floor... and when I started to think about there not being any top or bottom or sides to the canvas, it sort of became easier for me then to work on a square format, where *obviously* there wasn't any sides, where one side was as good as another side. But I found after working a couple of years with absolutely square canvases that optically they were not so good. It was better to have a... side a little bit off square, like forty-eight inches by fifty-two inches. And now, in the last five years or so, I'm going back to a four by five format to a great extent.... You know what I mean by a four by five format? —Like four feet by five feet. But this painting is pretty square, yes. It's seventy-two inches by seventy-eight inches.

Question: The blue area with the speckles in it...

Speaker: Yes.

Question: Could you say something about that?

Speaker: ... Yes. The speckles in it are something that tend to make the blue more vivid.

(BREAK IN RECORDING) Okay... Anyway, I had a show... and I think I sold two prints to two friends. (laughter) Which is worse than not selling anything, isn't? Isn't it like pity, something like that? (laughter) And I got a lousy review, also, where the critic on the *Times* said I was influenced by Dubuffet... (laughs) (laughter) and then she said something like, "but it's totally his own..." which (laughter)(unintelligible). But anyway...(laughter) at this point, 1977, a second large human begins to enter my work. I don't know where it comes from; that's not a (unintelligible), like the grotesque that come in in '63; and humor has entered my work... in the last five years or so. Next, please.

SLIDE

All right, another funny painting... (laughter) only it's a lithograph... All right, next.

SLIDE

Not big... sixteen by twenty, maybe. Okay, another lithograph. This one's about twenty by twenty-six. "Villa (or Via) Guchilla;" we're (laughing) coming to the end. Next please.

SLIDE

Okay. Now... I was at the Tamarind Lithography Foundation three times.... 1971, 1975, and 1976. And the first time I went out there I was sort of... dazzled... by the... space, the openness of the landscape. So I made tiny, tiny little drawings, like three inches by five-inch drawings... in '71... And I brought them back with me, and I then made paintings. So I started a series of Southwest landscape paintings.... In 1971; and I'm still at it. This inspiration was reinforced when I returned in '75 and '76; but I have a series of landscapes...like the one that you see here. And of course they're almost pure abstractions. Okay... Next.

SLIDE

Okay, another funny one. Next.

SLIDE

Okay, an abstract lithograph. Next.

SLIDE

Okay... I got started with birds around 1977; and I think they're just... flying (laughs) away... at the preset. They are not so... evident in my most recent... work; but in my last exhibition I had many bird paintings. Now look at how—look at how abstract this painting is. If you have any eye for abstraction, if you have any kind of a sophisticated eye... this is a very abstract painting. Look at the space between the... profile on the left and the head of the bird. And then you see how that same space picks up... and continues on the right? It's no accident. Next, please.

SLIDE

This was in my last show... birds. And more Expressionistic, I guess. Next.

SLIDE

Okay, another fun—another fun figure. Next.

SLIDE

Another fun painting. Now this one has a legitimate title. This is called "Charles Ives' Image." I started out abstractly; and I evolved a painting of a man with a flag. And then in the process of painting the man with the flag, it sort of took on an American flag kind of a character; and somehow or other I thought of Charles Ives. Now I wouldn't want to put an American flag in. That would be too obvious. So I made another kind of dopy flag.... And then I put a little New England green in the painting. So this does have some kind of subject matter... significance. Next, please.

SLIDE

Question: On that last slide, were those three forms in the upper—

Speaker: Wait a minute. Let's get the slide back. Back one. Now go ahead, please.

Question: Are those three forms on the right upper hand corner material or paint?

Speaker: They're all paint.

Question: Oh.

Speaker: But it is again really a little kinky to make a hard-edge painting in a generally free painting. In other words I used masking tape on the stripes in the platter. Next.

SLIDE

Very recent... last year, I guess. Next.

SLIDE

A lithograph abstraction, one of the last I've made. Next.

SLIDE

Last year, also, I think.... Next.

SLIDE

Last year, also.... Do you notice the paint is thinner? I'm working much thinner. Next.

SLIDE

Okay, here's another one of those Southwest abstractions. A big cloud.... Next.

SLIDE

Now I made a painting... I guess in 1980... and I got a little bit of publicity on it; where I started with a photograph of two singers. They were just two singers... you know, with a microphone... and after I got the painting finished... with a very little understanding of singing and jazz and modern jazz and all that stuff... nevertheless I called it "Punk Rock;" and it seemed to catch on.... It seemed as though that was a psychological painting of the time... or a sociological painting of the time.... So I got a little bit of publicity mileage on this painting. Now again in

terms of abstraction and form, do you see how the color in the face on the right goes through the hands... and then goes through the left-hand side of the composition? It's a very composed painting, even though it looks very Expressionistic. And fi—A painting like this might *seem* to be close to the New Wave painting, to the new Expressionism... but actually it's miles away, miles away. Actually it's rooted in a kind of deep sensitivity, deep sense of form. Next.

SLIDE

(pause) Okay... Next.

SLIDE

All right, now I'm in a dance thing... for the last year or so. Like disco painting—disco dancing. So I'm working with figures like you see here. I've never been in a disco in my life... but I have a pretty good idea of what goes on.... (laughter) And... I don't need much. I don't need much! All I need is a general idea... and then I make my own form. And I think I would be even *hindered* if I tried to go there and make drawings or something like that. I'm not stuck by any references; it's an abstract painting as far as I'm concerned. Next, please. A big painting, by the way.... How big? Sixty-four by seventy-eight; that is five foot four by six foot six.

SLIDE

Another one. Can you see how composed that is? (pause)

Question: Is there an average amount of time that you spend working on a painting?

Speaker: No. No... The one I showed you before... which I said was a very heavy painting and I said took a long time... I think I worked on that painting two years; I could have easily worked two years. This one—Now the painting's coming easier. I'm afraid to say that, because everything will fall apart... but every day it does seem to come easier.... But not *really* easier. I mean, I get more addicted than I used to, when I strike out plenty of numbers, at present. When you face your work with a certain amount of trepidation... a certain amount (unintelligible), and a certain amount of anxiety, it never goes away... never goes away.... Next.

SLIDE

Another one, same theme. Next.

SLIDE

Now these are this year.... This painting's also this year. A big painting. Next.

SLIDE

Okay, this is the last painting... and again I have birds here.... And that's it! Okay, can we have lights, please. (Applause) Now we—I think we did very well in the questions; and it helps me enormously... but if you have other questions now... that you want to talk about, we still have some time. Anything else?

Question: Can I ask something?

Speaker: Yeah.

Question: (unintelligible)... on the subject matter right now....

Speaker: I don't need subject matter right now.

Question: Yeah, do you think that's because of experience?

Speaker: Yeah. I don't think it; I know it.

Question: Oh. Okay.

Speaker: When I was teaching at the Studio School, up until about two years ago... I used to draw, when I first went there—like I'd draw for an hour and a half until the students had made something. But I've stopped doing that now... also. So I always draw it all from nature. That doesn't mean that I won't... but I just feel better now... as I said before, trying to pull everything out from myself. I've experienced recently... something good; and that is, I work less and produce more. And that's one of the things that's very unsolved. You can't *not* work; but there's also something of incubation... and I think in your lifetime you'll something about in between periods... like it might be better to go for a walk... than to paint. *Not this summer...* (laughter) (laughs) but maybe when you get to be thirty-five, you know forty, not working might

be more productive than working. It's a very strange relationship there. And the whole past has been one of... you can't hand you this—You know we have this big tradition of skill in painting and so forth; and I think, in the last thirty or forty years that has lessened... and now, in the next thirty or forty years it might be even more important that you have a *general* cultural development, a *general* refinement, a *general* sensitization—like listening to music... and then that might help you more than making a drawing at that time. I think that might help. And I've always thought that it would be a great asset to an art school to have the students learn dancing, in the sense of action movement, or movement... dancing, so that they would get a better feeling in their bodies... more sensitivity in their bodies.... And then maybe all kinds of developments like that coming up in the next thirty or forty years... as we go away from *just* technical expertise—not that I would ever agree to anything other than handedness.... You can't *talk* a painting. But I think general cultivation might play a more important role than it has in the past.

Question: George?

Speaker: Yes.

Question: How do you advise the students in this era to pick their way between the incredible (unintelligible) to things....

Speaker: This is such a problem that I don't know anything about what the solution is... And I think it's such a problem in the art schools now, because very often they're cafeteria situations, aren't they? Right. You know, you want to be a conceptual artist? Okay? Here; we'll make you a conceptual artist. (laughter) A little realism? Go ahead. And I don't know how it's going to work out; I really don't know....

Question: Is there any degree of—

Speaker: Wait a minute! I have had to stop teaching because of that. And... I mean I've had to stop teaching painting because of that. And I do teach at the Studio School because that's so close to this old-fashioned point of view. I have a hand in sort of guiding the school; so that school reflects my kind of old-fashioned states in this thinking. But otherwise when I've gone around to give criticisms, it's been one disaster after another. And here... so-so. You know, like

fifty percent or forty-five percent affected.... Or I can't tune in on some of the painting at all, not at all.... Excuse me, what were you saying?

Question: I just wanted to ask if the time you were growing up around age twenty-eight to thirty/thirty-five, from what we saw you seemed to be hit by a lot of things and you seemed to absorb a little... maybe not all of it, not of where--

Speaker: Yeah, not like now... not like now—*Nothing* like now, nothing, nothing, nothing like now. I think if you have anyone here talking to you, say between the ages of... say sixty-five or over... they'll say exactly what I am saying... that they are sort of dumb-founded by all the directions which are in the culture—Now it's good that we have a pluralistic society! Supposing we were in the Soviet Union... where you only could work one way.... That would ghastly—that would be much worse, right? But I think... some trouble has occurred in the last ten or fifteen years, where a tremendous amount of freedom is around.... And then it's as though the artists don't have a base... so they're up in the air all the time... and there's no earth. Like to me... when I was a kid... about... twelve years old... with a bunch of other bums, I used to hang out in front of the candy store-- They don't exist any more—where there would be papers sold outside on the stand. And the kids would be pushing each other around... and raising hell generally.... All of a sudden the guy who owns the place would come out, and he'd say, "**Stop fucking around there, boys!**" (laughter) I always have the feeling that that's what's going on in the art world, that it's... just fucking around. And... like no stability at all.... So we'll see—It's not going to stop; you can't stop it. You can't stop progress.... But there's something not right about the art chic character of the present art world.... But I don't want to moralize; I've said more than I should say on that.... Let's have one more.

Question: What kind of music do you listen to?

Speaker: I listen to classical musical all the time. When I go into my studio, the first thing I do is turn on an FM station. In New York we're very lucky; we have four classical FM stations, and you *always* can get a good program. And the reason I called that painting "Punk Rock" was because... at Columbia... Well, the WNYC program ends at five; then I switch to Columbia University. And then their program—their classical program ends at six—and a rock program would come on...so I knew about punk rock because I couldn't always get over to the radio to

turn it off. (laughter) And that's how I was got; that's how that painting got that title. I think we've had enough, haven't we? Okay, thank you for being—

Comment: Thank *you*! (Applause)

END OF RECORDING