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SKOWHEGAN SCHOOL
OF PAINTING & SCULPTURE
Skowhegan, Maine

Lecture by Connie Fox
Summer, 1982

Intro: ...who knows more about tonight's speaker than anybody else in this room, I give you Bill King. (applause)

Bill King: Thank you, it's a pleasure to be with you. This summer, of all our visiting artists except one were men. And the general feeling, it's an imbalance. And it was pointed out to me that we have in our midst, a visitor, a woman and an artist, and she was asked if she would show us slides of her work, and share some observations and experiences on a life of art. She's graciously consented, and that artist is my valued colleague, Connie Fox, born in Fowler, Colorado, 1925, rural Colorado. Her mother was a painter. Self taught primitive. Fox saw no art until she arrived at the University of Colorado. She has taught and lived in Boulder, Colorado, Los Angeles, California, Berkeley, California, Albuquerque, New Mexico, Pittsburgh, PA, and moved to East Hampton, New York in 1979. She's had about 30 solo shows, many group shows and would like to serve to you, as she has to many other artists across the country, an example of survival, talent, application, and commitment, Connie Fox. (applause)

Connie Fox [hereafter CF]: Just so you know what you're in for, I've got about one tray and a little over of slides. I'd like to say just a few things before I begin to show you the slides. Recently I was comparing notes with a friend of mine who lives in East Hampton, and was born in Brooklyn and grew up in the bosom of the New York art world, and after talking a while, we decided that basically there wasn't too much difference in our approach to art or evaluation. And our backgrounds were very different, and we were trying to figure out why. I, as Bill said, grew up in a rural area of Colorado, and I think the only art I ever saw probably was a reproduction of Grant Woods, and wonder of wonders, I found a book on the shelves of the high school library on Leonardo Da Vinci, called the

Life of Leonardo Da Vinci by Marijowksi, and it was marvelous. It told all about he dug up cadavers to investigate them and people shouted in the streets to him anti-Christ, and it all seemed like a very strange world. I for some reason, felt that I always wanted to be an artist even though I didn't know what it meant to be one. I of course had seen a few reproductions, and it didn't bother me a bit that every artist that I'd ever heard of had been male. I figured that I could do anything that any man could do. What really bothered me was that I thought every artist was Italian (laughter) and I didn't know how I was going to manage that. I even remember considering telling a white lie when I went to college and saying that my mother was Italian because her maiden name was Marti, and maybe that meant that she came from say the Italian sector of Switzerland, or something like that. I did find a preacher's wife to give me a few painting lessons when I was a senior in high school. But the thing that really excited me, I think, was getting hold of a movie camera and going down and filming a garbage dump and how it looked when it was blowing in the wind.

Why don't we start with the slides. I don't have anywhere near a complete selection of slides since I had thought about showing them. I'm going to show you some of the early work, and it's pretty choppy. I have things from sort of every period, but it's by no means complete, fortunately for you, and there are whole sections that are missing. For example, I don't show any figurative work which I've done quite a lot of. In fact, my master's degree which I got from the University of New Mexico was all figurative. This painting is about 25 years old. It's large, probably 80 inches wide. The subject matter, and here I'd sort of like to make a comment that subject matter is different from content--is a subject matter that I think I've pursued all along. And a lot of it has to do with mountains in the background, no middle ground, and some large object in the foreground. This is subject matter that I've played around with in various ways as you'll see. However the content has definitely changed. I'll point that out as I go along. this is some, an early work, I suppose preceding the painting that I just showed you. I use very little color, and when I did, it was bright. This particular...like the flower shows up later on in various ways. Now see that's where it gets stuck, right? Oil on canvass

Questioner [hereafter Q]: What's the scale?

CF: Most of these you saw are around 50 x 60, or 45 x 55. The color's off on this one. And the next one is a detail. I always seem to be painting Italian landscapes, even though I grew up where there was no water, or buildings anywhere near this. This particular painting has sort of a history and I was really that the slide of it turned up. I painted this when I was getting my master's degree at the University of New Mexico, and a Professor of mine had turned over some industrial plastics to me to use, vinyl chlorides, using ketone thinners. And you heard that lecture on

materials the other night, Reed Kay mentioned Robert Maillard had written an article called ³The Air of Art is Poisoned,² in 1962 in Art News. And I was one of his case histories, and it all resulted from my using the plastic paints with these really terrible thinners. This particular painting, I won a prize for it, Purchase Prize, and it was during the days when there was a big discussion about which was better, abstract or figurative painting. And believe it or not, this was considered to be an abstract painting, and there was a big fight after the prize had been given, and I knew this painting was going to end up in a basement someplace, so I wrote them a letter and said I'd like to buy it back for the Purchase Prize, and they sent me a one line reply saying, yes, please do, so I got this painting back. It was very foolish, I would never do anything like that again. But it finally ended up on somebody's wall in New Mexico, and the wall collapsed it was hanging on, and that was the end of that painting.

This is sort of an archetypal landscape of the entrance into the mountain. There are few here from what I called my weird Berkeley series (laughter). Detail. It was about this time that I moved to Pennsylvania, and I found a studio in an old Pennsylvania railroad station, it was immense. And I can attest to the fact that a studio can be too big. I used to start off the morning by bouncing tennis balls off the backboard which was also my easel, and doing a little exercise before I started to paint, it really ruined my scale. At first I tried to command the size, found I couldn't do it, and my painting really collapsed for a while. This is one of those paintings, I think it's too complicated, and it lost its structure. That's a detail. Another series of rainbows that crops up at various times again. It was about this time, I think I was having so much trouble with the painting that I began to try other things. I don't know which came first, because I tried other things, I kind of lost track of the painting, but some of the flowers that I had been doing begin to show up in relief. These were all done incidentally on pillow ticking in wide widths that I had bought in Denmark. Just previous to this I had taught in Denmark for a year in the far northern part in an isolated area, New Experimental College. It was during the days when everyone was interested in experimental education, and in which students really set their own course of study. And they didn't need professors if they didn't want them, and at this particular school they could even choose the degree they wanted to award themselves. Anyway, I didn't do this particular work there, but this is where I got the pillow ticking, which was very interesting because I could form it and put the paint on top of it, it wouldn't sink in because it was so dense. It was a beautiful surface. I could also draw on it. There's a detail from that. These are about 8 feet wide, incidentally.

Q: ???

CF: Yes, it's life-size. Then, I took the heads out of the flower and did a

series of heads/masks using found objects. I didn't know anything about ceramics, fortunately, or I never would have tried this, I just set out and did what I wanted to do. This is Alodar Mulberger, incidentally, if any of you know him, he runs the Fischbach Gallery. I thought all those chicken feathers around his head were very appropriate. That's Elaine De Kooning.

Q: When were these done?

CF: These were done about 15 years ago.

Q: How long would you work on these?

CF: Oh about a year. I was doing other things at the same time. In fact I did some photographic work, not just taking photographs, but working them into sculptural forms that I'll show you at the end of the paintings even though they were done about the same time. Well, then I decided, still in this immense studio, the only thing I could do was to get much smaller and get my color more jewel like to see if I couldn't do something with the space in that manner. And that's when I began to do these paintings. Now these are about 24 x 32, something like that. You may notice that somewhere in here I began to use color. Before that, I didn't care about it at all. The color then was emotional, topical, and I can remember, actually when I was in Denmark, there was one very specific day I decided I wanted to use color, and I took out every color I had and began mixing it all with white, and mixing it with every other color, just kind of simple things, and from then on, very often, even though the subject matter say remained the same, still the content of the painting was really the color.

This is a smallish one also. This is a bad slide. But, I wanted to show it because it was the first painting that I did when I moved to New York State, to East Hampton, and it's a small painting, but within this painting, are many things that occurred in later paintings. I arrived in East Hampton with no work. Something similar happened to me that happened to Jake Bierto, that I was getting ready to move to East Hampton, had everything loaded in a 14 foot U-Haul, including most of my work. My slides didn't burn up, but my work did, different than Jake's. But two fellas stole the truck and they couldn't get into it so they set it a fire, and some of things, a few of things were saved from it. The small paintings that I just showed you were all in that fire, and they have water marks on them, but amazingly enough, it doesn't seem to effect the look of the painting, any. In fact, I found just a couple of weeks ago, when I was working on a painting, I actually was putting in some very, not accidental but conscious drips that looked almost exactly like the damage that had been done to some of these paintings from the post fire.

I started a tornado series. This is the first one that of that group.

That's a detail. Somebody commented on this painting that the tornado looked very sedate and calm, and everything around it was flying apart. In this one, I wanted the outside space in the inside space. The outside air and the inside air to get mixed or mingled, and I think it worked. I tried several of those. Here's another one. This is quite a large painting. It's 85 inches wide. Somebody said to me, you get a lot for your money in this one. That's a detail, which is a bad slide, it's much darker.

Q: Are these still oils?

CF: These now are all, all of these are acrylic.

Q: ???

CF: About the time I moved to East Hampton. I just found that because of all the problems I'd had with the toxic paint, before then, that I was allergic to turpentine, and it caused me a lot of trouble so I paint entirely in acrylics now. This is sort of a medium sized painting, 54 inches wide. The tornado is beginning to disappear. This one I thought was a failed painting, and I got it out, and put in that transparent box and somehow pulled the whole thing together. Since then I have been using some transparent shapes like that, and I'm kind of interested in seeing how the painting goes on behind it, and through it, and so forth, and yet where the lines are drawn, the area becomes complete in itself, and acts as say, a side of a box. This is a small painting on paper. This is also on paper. This is on paper, 22 x 30. This is large, 80 inches. This is about 35, 40. I had gone to Italy in October, and done a lot of sketching out of doors, which I hadn't done for years and years. And I really wasn't interested in the end result, but just the activity of it. And I'd worked on a little bench in a kind of grove in a garden, and did it over and over and over again, and didn't realize until after I'd finished this painting, that I was doing exactly what I'd done in those sketches. But the whole thing was totally transformed. The little bench became a doorway at the back, and I'm not sure where these figures came from, or where they're going, either.

Not so much interested in that looking like water, which it may or may not, but in using a kind of new way of getting a transition from one area to another. Here again, the same elements as in that first painting, pretty much. Some mountains in the background, and not much in the foreground and something up front. This is a fairly large painting. The thing that made me first consider doing this painting was looking at a travel folder out of the corner of one eye, and seeing what happened with a bridge with the water going under it. And then working that water into a kind of a cross hatched stroke. And I think a lot of painting is begun this way. DeKooning refers to it as a slipping glimpse. It's just the tiniest thing that can set you going. I think I usually have, when I'm painting, there's some small thing

that sets it off. And I may easily get off the track, and I may not accomplish what I set out to do, so chances are, I will try over and over again, and never feeling that I've failed in not accomplishing it, but that each time, it sets off an idea for a new painting.

Ok, there's another 30 slides of some photographic...This print is about 40 inches x 50, somewhere in there. It was taken with a 35 mm camera from the top of Notre Dame. And then I made a print myself in my studio. I had an enlarger with a tilt up head, and I exposed it with the paper on the wall, the film hanging on the wall. This is actually film, it's not paper, so that everything that looks like it's white is transparent, so I have it backed on a white surface. Then, I went in by hand and did a lot of work that would just improve the image, and also added all these little figures down here around this circle, and various other things which are kind of hard to see unless you get up close.

Q: Did you add them with chemicals or with ???

CF: I added them with wax crayon. Here's another one with a few New Mexico rocks collaged in to the top. I love the way, I think there's something to be said here about the making of images. I don't know how much this has to do with art, but I just really love, from time to time, making images. And I don't necessarily use photography because it's quick, but because I like the image I get from it. For example, when these begin to break down, they look very much like etchings. And if you could see a little section of this, you'd see how unphotographic it looked. I also really love the black and white quality. I would use different kind of chemicals with this film in order to get a kind of brownish quality. This was...the basis of this is a painting by Lenan that I photographed in the Louvre. And then again, the figure is about 40 inches high, and the rest of the stuff is collaged in. And recently, I saw this painting again in the Louvre, and I'd been looking at this so long that the painting looked very pale and weak to me. This is the same thing, but it's made to be hung, you know, in a very loose manor, not framed. Incidentally, that one just before, which has such a ...we'll get back there eventually, there, which has such a pristine white frame on it, went through that fire, and it came out much improved.

These are mostly photographs that I took in the Louvre, on film, and is sandwiched between 2 pieces of Plexiglas into box shape. I think I really like the photographs of the boxes better than the boxes, because it shows up the kind of reflection that you get from the photograph into the bottom of the box. You'll see this a little better. The image in the bottom of this box is David's the Crowning of Napoleon. The large figure is a Roman Sculpture, and then you see some of the crowds in the Louvre, just below the figure. This may be a little hard to read, but the upside down image is a reflection in the bottom of this box. And some of the images you see are

from the back of the box, and some from the forward part. These are all about 12 inches high, and then I combine some of these units into sections that were 3 or 4 feet high, and they would stand on pedestals, about equal height.

Perspective really looks screwy on that one, doesn't it? It looks like it's backwards. Now these are all color xerox. They're 9.5 x 15 inches and for a while, while I was in Pennsylvania, I was really obsessed with using this color xerox machine. This was about 6 years ago, there would only about 20 color xerox machines in all of Pittsburgh, and they were mainly in the offices of heads of corporations. So, I had a little trouble getting access to them. And I think here again, I just loved making the images. I think they're kind of corny, and don't have too much to do with art, but I do know that I was delighted to work with them for the time that I did. I've totally lost interest in it now. This was all about 5 years ago. I like the way these tools took on kind of human qualities. To me these look like Shakespearean guards.

Q: ??? How did you make them ???

CF: People who use a color xerox machine use it as a glue for a collage. I took in these objects and laid them on the color xerox machine. And I had a whole palette of objects that I would use over and over again in various ways. Somebody in one review referred to me as the bag lady of xerox (laughter). One of those flowers, the one on the upper left is a black and white typewriter ribbon. Everybody thinks this is Karl Marx. It's not. It's Walt Whitman. This is a whole wall of those. I think this is Grant Wood returning. Four identical xeroxes combined, and then with some handwork and combine. One morning, when I was in ???, there were two large bags of high heeled shoes mysteriously left on the doorstep. These last three slides, you might notice are considerably higher in color. They were made by someone for the electrowork show for the catalogue. And, just incidentally, at the opening of the show in Rochester, Xerox had come in midway in the process of the show and put some money into it. So that there could be a catalogue. And then they had a big dinner at the opening of the show, and so the artists who were involved in the show were told to go to this particular place for dinner. And we'd been there about 10 minutes when we all began to realize that we were the only ones in this particular room having dinner, and we realized that Xerox was throwing a big party over in the big building with champagne--we had white wine. And they were getting catalogues that were hard bound, and we were getting catalogues that were paperbound, and we all began to crack up at this division. All hell broke loose the next day. There were some critics and a lot of discussion groups, and various things went on about this particular divergence.

Q: What sort of materials were used for the back ???

CF: Very common materials. The nice thing about the xerox machine is that it really transforms things. This was simply some red paper. This one is just a very ordinary old paper bag, the yellow, and it's the same color. All the yellow is the same color paper bag. The thing about the xerox machine, it has a very narrow depth of field, so things very quickly go out of focus. It also puts edges on things. It's almost as if it does a kind of drawing. It definitely has a mind of its own. I think that's one of the reasons I got so interested in it, because of how it transformed the image. It also has a kind of sick color, which I enjoyed and I played around a lot with the color dials. In fact, I don't know if you noticed, but these have a very kind of fine look to them, unlike the usual xerox image which is crude. And not that I particularly...I don't object to the other image at all, in fact I like it. But, when I began to play around with the dials, I found that it made a big difference, sort of the value, or the amount of color I used. It automatically led me into getting a finer, more resolved image.

Q: ???

CF: I did, usually only in about 8 or 10. For one thing, I just can't stand repetition of any kind. Also, I would do maybe 40 or 50 before I would get one I liked. Then, I could go ahead and make an edition of that, but the xerox machine doesn't necessarily do the same thing every time. I might not be able to get 10 that would be identical, so I usually didn't do more than that. Very often, I'd only do one. That's the last one. (applause)

[END OF AUDIO]