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SKOWHEGAN SCHOOL OF PAINTING & SCULPTURE
Skowhegan, Maine

Lecture by SUZAN FRECON
2011

Transcriber: Judith Stoodley

Introductory remarks (Craig Drennen, Dean): Hello. Hello, everyone. If I can have your attention, please. Tonight, believe it or not, is the eleventh in the Barbara Lee Lecture Series. Incredible. That's more like it. So we have Miss Suzan Frecon, who's going to be speaking tonight. But before we get started I'm going to ask everyone to please turn off or silence your cell phones. Or throw them on the floor. And for you folks who are new to the lecture hall—or to the barn and our lecture series, the rest room: exit out the back door and keep walking to the left, toward the library. I also want to just remind everybody that there's plastic on the floor, there's some fresco equipment around, because as you know, this barn is also a working fresco studio and there are ten frescoes going to be made in the next like ten days. So… it's happening all around. All right. So. Tonight Miss Frecon is going to be introduced by our own resident faculty, Mr. Dave Mackenzie.

DM: Thank you. Great, thanks. So first I'd like to say that it's a real pleasure to have

the opportunity to introduce Suzan Frecon, I think largely because me to really try to sort of think about what this work is and does and how exactly it functions. Perhaps some of my enthusiasm can also best be expressed or gleaned from quoting the artist herself. When asked in an interview what advice she would give emerging artists, she replied, "Try to make work that's exceptionally valid and worthy. It is your obligation, and it isn't easy. I consider painting to be a high form of knowledge. It should be constructed so that when successful it will be illuminating and enlightening. It should raise consciousness. It should take you as a viewer outside of yourself, somewhere you haven't been before. Art is a vital human need. I'm turned off by careerism. It's nice to get some encouragement, but it's necessary to get honest criticism. Just because you use paint doesn't mean you're a painter." End of quote. I don't know if Suzan is a hammer thrower, but I can sort of hear it hitting the table. Obviously there are many artists, and maybe even painters specifically, that might quibble with that last sentence, insisting, perhaps, that using paint is neither here nor there, or perhaps, even, that it is less paint and more attitude. Still, it is that answer of Suzan's which now reads as the more radical statement, even if it remains a deeply personal belief. Maybe, in all honesty, the statement is less radical and more philosophical, less rupture and more unity, like those paintings with their asymmetrical harmony. Anyway, I do know that the paintings are [as] striking as they are rigorous. Rigor where every decision regarding color—red earth tones and indigo blue, for example—and composition has been argued beforehand, and then re-argued on canvas through the act of painting and the constant sense of searching, searching with a belief that acting and looking are related and embodied ways of

getting a handle on the world, although I'm learning that Suzan might not use the word "handle," but instead talk about ungraspability. As a brief aside that I want to use as a way of thinking about Suzan's work, and has sort of come to me in sort of researching and also trying to sort of contend with it, is I want to mention a recent lecture that I struggled through. This lecture was by Eric Schmidt, the Executive Chairman of Google. In his speech he talked briefly about Google's recent project to digitize the painting collections of prestigious museums. I think there's a lot to applaud in that project, but I have qualms with at least one part of the following statement that he made. Quoting now: "We're embarking upon an enormous art project. There are two very famous museums here in Berlin, one of which is the Alte Nationalgalerie, who have taken very high resolution pictures of the museum's artwork, put it on the Web, and hosted that information with the hope of preserving these piece forever. Ninety thousand people have visited those collections. All of a sudden these museums have many more visitors per day than they did before. We're now digitizing archives in the art world, all so they're at the same standard, so we can have a whole record of the human race." End quote. Can the virtual visitors to a museum really be counted alongside the brick and mortar visitors? Is attending a museum virtually the same as attending to a painting? I won't answer these questions, but instead let me once again quote Suzan Frecon: "I mostly develop my work by looking at paintings and by painting. I went to Penn State and majored in art. When I began at eighteen I had never been to a museum, yet I knew I wanted to paint. I went to class and looked at the slides, and it just didn't make sense to me. And I thought, 'I've got to go to Europe to learn about painting in depth and to look

at real paintings.' I managed to get to Europe and look at the actual paintings, and it made sense visually, why they were great, why certain painters were great. The more I looked the more I understood. So it's important to see the actual work." End quote. If artworks are an argument, and I think they are, I feel that in the case of Suzan Frecon that the argument centers pointedly around color, form, and the potential with an artwork to contribute to something we probably term "being human." This may be the reason, then, that a major exhibition of her work was entitled *Form, Color, Illumination: Suzan Frecon Painting*. It's not *Form, Color, Illumination, the Paintings of Suzan Frecon*, but *Suzan Frecon Painting*, as if she works to paint form, color and light or knowledge. So while I'm certain there are many arguments being made in Suzan's work, I feel confident asserting that one that says that painting – or maybe contending with painting—is an act of looking that happens with one's body in front of, alongside, next to, crouching by, at an angle from, far from and close to a painting located in physical space, and therefore a painting dealing with conditions of that physical space. One more quote: "In the beginning I was interested in story, in works by Breughel and Bosch. But the more I looked, the more I admired the paint itself. I looked at Velazquez and at Goya. I was in Spain at the time, and I saw that paint was what made the painting successful. Later I went to Italy and saw Bellini, and that affected my perception of color. I realized how important and vital color was for me." Suzan Frecon was born in 1941 in Mexico, PA, and she lives and works in New York. Recently Suzan was the subject of a major exhibition from [sic] *Form, Color, Painting: Suzan Frecon Painting* at the Menil Collection in Houston. It's traveled to the Kunstmuseum in Bern, Switzerland.

In 2010 she was included in the Whitney Biennial. Other venues include David Zwirner in New York; Galerie Philippe Casini, Paris; Jack Tilton Gallery in New York; Berkley Art Museum and Pacific Archive, Berkley, California; Laurence Marques Gallery in New York; The Drawing Center, New York; and Galerie Friedrich, Bern, Switzerland. Suzan Frecon's work is represented in numerous public collections including Arkansas Art Center; Birmingham Museum of Art; Fogg Art Museum; Krannert Art Museum; Kunstmuseum, Bern, Switzerland; the Menil Collection; the Museum of Modern Art; the National Gallery of Art; Staatliche Graphische Sammlung; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, among others. Suzan recently also told me that she almost made it to Skowhegan many years ago, by way of a relationship to fresco. Unfortunately circumstances changed and she was never able to make it here then. So with that in mind, please help me welcome Suzan Frecon.

SF: Thank you for the wonderful introduction. And thank you, Sarah Workneh and the staff at Skowhegan for bringing me to Skowhegan. Better late than never. And I'm very happy to be here and to see the high quality of all your work that I've been seeing and talking to you… and looking—walking in the woods, too. I'm going to go home and read Thoreau's Maine Woods, which I've been wanting to read for a long time. But first I'm going to start off showing you a painting. I brought a painting along, and so I thought that would be the best way to start, because I'm going to show images of my paintings. I'm going to talk about my work, which, you know, sounds egotistical; but it's where I should start, 'cause it's what I know better than if I had gotten together something about art in general and painting in general. So I'm just going to walk around with this. {inaudible, off mike 10:42-11:40} this later. So

my talk comes from my work, not the reverse. And my manifesto is—as Dave said, it's that you have to see the paintings first-hand in order to comprehend and experience them. The scale, the color, the material, the light on the painting, the nuances of the paint handling—They're all false when you just see a reproduction. This should be obvious without having to declare it, like global warming, but it isn't, because it's prevalent in our time to broadcast artworks by means or reproduction rather than on its own reality. And this feeds on itself, encouraging a kind of art that exists mainly through its success in being reproduced. So I adamantly insist, through the real work, that the only way to experience it is to actually see it. Well, that isn't possible for this talk, except for the small one that's going around. So I tried to make a sort of film showing something of the changing light on the painting material in an exhibition of recent paintings at David Zwirner Gallery in New York. The paintings are oil on linen or with the smaller paintings they're oil on wood; and for the most part they're made of pigments ground in linseed oil. Am I coming through all right in the mike? They're large scale, nine feet in height, the paintings you're going to see on the film. And the scale and compositions evolved from precise measurements and proportions. The measurements also come from the human scale: the foot of twelve inches leads to the nine-foot high painting. The height was determined by how a human standing before it would perceive the painting. And they're purposely hung very low, usually nine inches from the floor, regardless of the ceiling height, so that the viewers' impression of entering and experiencing the painting is the most important consideration, more important than, say, the height of the ceiling or the architecture. The large-scale paintings are the core of my work, and all my work

comes from them. Light is very important. These paintings evolved with natural light, so it is really an integral part of their realization. During the show in the sort of film you're going to see, I insisted that only natural light be used for the duration of the exhibition in order that the viewers' experience be the fullest possible; and the Zwirner Gallery space was very well equipped for showing the paintings with natural illumination, because there were large skylights which enabled the constantly changing daylight to function in tandem with the physical properties and the dimensions of the painting. The movement and fluctuations of the light contributed to a more heightened experience, which in artificial light would be more static and singular. In fact, any painting I've ever seen seems to manifest its innate capabilities better in natural light than in artificial light, even if it was painted in artificial light. The paintings are installed with adequate space around each one of them so that the viewer can focus on one painting at a time; yet the installation is intimate enough so that the paintings play off of each other in the large room, especially the *embodiment of red* paintings. I'm very engaged in the installation of my works; so I strive to make even bad conditions as good as possible for seeing and experiencing the work, by working on the lighting with the technicians and trying to find solutions so that the work can function and give the best that it possibly give for the ultimate goal of the viewer's experience. So not only should the individual piece strive to be art, but the installation should also be an extension of this, so that the whole experience should be art too. So the film is a failure, of course, because it doesn't come close to the actuality of seeing the paintings installed with the continuously changing early fall natural light presenting to the viewer's perception

infinite possibilities and dimensions. So… if we can turn off the lights. Are you ready for the lights? We're going to go to the film. And I'm not going to talk during the film. It's about six minutes. I'll just let it play.

FILM (NO AUDIO) (17:18-24:39)

Okay, the following are some images, many in my studio, the background of my work, the oil paintings and a few drawings and watercolors. My paintings have evolved and developed over a span of about fifty years of working, and by working I mean continued study of painting and art, and continued practice and search in my studio.

IMAGES

These are earlier watercolors from the Eighties on, and I refer to them as red structural studies. Most of them are more linear, but it becomes more challenging for me to expand into areas rather than lines of color. They're part of the search for strengthening my compositions and forms, incorporating an underlying fabric of dissonances and asymmetry which carry over into the measured paintings.

IMAGE

And these are later watercolors in my studio. Again, I work with the natural light from the window in this studio.

IMAGE

And these are more watercolors with a panel in the background.

IMAGE

This is called *heptagonal red earth*. It's a watercolor on a long format of found old Indian paper. In the watercolors the paper is the ground and the support, so I treat it

differently than the oil paintings; but they're all part of the same unity of all my work.

IMAGE

This is *vertical orange composition*. It's a watercolor taped to my studio wall.

IMAGE

And *composition on a more conventional format with tears*. It's the title. And it's on old Indian paper.

IMAGE

Again, large format paintings are the core of my work and the watercolors are generated more or less by concepts for larger paintings. But they're inspired by the large paintings, and I search for colors and compositions with them, or I do compositions after the large paintings. I don't generally make a small painting and then turn it into a larger painting. More often the reverse happens.

IMAGE?

The large painting generates a series of watercolors. The watercolors are works that stand alone for what they are. The large and small work, oil and watercolor, are all part of the same work. The work comes from the preceding work.

IMAGE

And these are watercolors related to a large painting called *composition in four colors*, and you saw it on the film.

IMAGE

And these are small studies. I was looking for the colors.

IMAGE

Another study.

IMAGE

And this was related to the *embodiment of red* paintings, which were more or less toward the end of the film.

IMAGE

And then… these are notes and sketches regarding the large paintings. The large paintings come from a concept which I kind of note in this way with sketches, just to note my ideas so that I can refer to them; and then from that I go to a carefully measure plan. And the measured plans take me a good amount of time, usually, to work out. They're complicated and, you know, the balance of the curves and everything…. You know, you can see that I've worked on this for a while, and I collaged another version on the top, and….

IMAGE

And this is—Part of process is—These are working notes of mixtures and dates so that I can refer back to them if I want to try to get the color—sheen—right again. I measure the amount of oil that I put into it, and how long it takes to dry, and so on and so forth.

IMAGE

So I often refer back to these notes for various reasons, for the ratios of pigment to oil and everything.

IMAGE

And these are more working notes that show the history of the painting.

IMAGE

This is a studio view with medium-size oil paintings on wood, and some watercolors, and work table.

IMAGE

The duration of finishing a painting consists of hours upon hours. I build up the paint, brushwork, sand off, put back on, consider, look, and measure. All my decisions are visual ones. Little by little, through seasons and even years, they finally start to attain their completed state. And that's the exciting part, when they get close to fine-tuning. They go through stages where it seems impossible; but then by perseverance, patience, and especially will, I look at it and it's finally reached the state of completion. And at that time, many times I feel completely emptied out; I feel there's really nothing of me, the person, left. It's all in the painting. And then—now it's for the viewer to disappear into the painting. And then I begin again.

IMAGE

And this is an installation view at the Kunstmuseum. And I'm showing it because it shows compositions that have vertical, horizontal, straight and curved areas of color. And the painting stayed from 1996 to 2008.

IMAGE

This painting is titled *four directions*, and it's oil on linen, and it's…. It's about… seven or eight feet tall. It's from 2005, and it's a series of paintings. I'm still working on this series, and I just finished the second one.

IMAGE

And this is titled *composition in four colors: 1*.

IMAGE

So most of paintings develop from previous paintings, as this one did. It's a more recent composition which incorporates a reverse curve. The reverse curve was something I was trying to work into my painting for a long time, and it shows up in the watercolors. But this was the first time I actually got it to work in the painting composition. A lot of my paintings from the past ten years and before that are composed of curved areas of color in precise proportion and asymmetrical balance to other curved areas in the painting, generated by the rectangular formats of the paintings' outside dimensions. Many things inspire and affect my work.

IMAGE?

Though it shows up{unintelligible}. I think there are a lot of common denominators in my paintings with other paintings through other cultures. And the reverse curve…. You know, it…. It was (wasn't? 33:50) throughout my work, but I also was connected to a film showing the rebuilding of an ancient Chinese rainbow bridge, and that stayed in my mind, and… you know, I kept thinking about it, and finally did the reverse curve; even though it looks nothing like a Chinese rainbow bridge, it's in my painting.

IMAGE

From small sketches, some in watercolor, I went on, as with all the large paintings, to do a very precisely measured composition on graph paper. Why? Why do I do this? As I studied artworks I found the ones I considered really good possessed the ingredient of a good composition holding it, as well as the virtuoso skill of the artist. I started to see that weak compositions were prevalent in my contemporaries' as

well as my own work. I felt I had the ideas, the content, the passion, the soul; but the paintings had to be built with virtuosity on the strength of the composition. In my work the spiritual and the physical are the same. Gardner (spelling?) writes: "The nature of form, used in its widest sense, that of a total organic structure, a synthesis of all the elements of which that structure is constructed, and the manner in which these elements are related and united to create its distinctive character…." She goes on: "The character of the material and the process and tools with which it is worked are vital determinants in the character of the form. Elements of form are line, light and dark, color, texture, areas, mass, volume, the fourth dimension, movement in space." So I wanted to strengthen my form, and I try to do it from these drawings, which are the bedrock foundation for the rest of the ingredients in my paintings.

IMAGE?

So it's a long process, finding the measured composition. I work out the relationships of the curves asymmetrically throughout the composition so that each curve plays off the balances, tensions, and dissonance of the other curves in the painting. The graph paper drawings consisting of guidelines also indicate what will be areas of color, which as you look at the painting can be either figure or ground or what I prefer to call "full space" and "empty space." At the same time I don't want my paintings to look like drawings; I want them to be paintings. I also don't want them to be hard-edged where color meets color. I paint them freehand, and I'm very conscious of how the edge of one color area meeting another comes off visually. I build up the colors and the negative/positive play of light on the surfaces of the composition. Again, all my decisions are finally visual decisions, whether it's

regarding colors, measurements, proportions, materials, etcetera. As I was developing the composition, its evolution with four colors fell into place. In this case I had been working on sketch compositions of the four colors with watercolors, as you saw before in the images. I didn't arrive at the four colors as watercolors first, though. I made oil color swatches and thought about various combinations. Then I made some small panels in oil paint in scale to visually investigate the four color combinations I had arrived at. Earth reds are prevalent in my painting, and you'll see two of them here: Persian and Hematite, set off by the Ultramarine Blue. While I was working on the first one I felt compelled to make a second version, doing a slightly—doing a deep, translucent blue for the bottom ovoid. So I think it can be interpreted as an opening or as a form—you know, both ways: empty space or full space, void or form. Even though I used the same earth red pigments in both paintings, the Persian and the Hematite, they are not exactly the same, due to their drying properties, which are affected by conditions of weather, temperature, applications, precise measures of ingredients. And as for the Hematite pigment, I wanted to substantiate the layers by building them up, and I expected them to get darker. But to my surprise the more I layered them the lighter and more silvery the surface became, instead of darker. I realized that of course the properties of Hematite would cause it to reflect light instead of absorbing it; so I let it stand as its properties insisted, and it thus took the painting further than the perimeters of my concept.

IMAGE

This is from the installation at the Menil Foundation in 2008; and the painting on the

left is *composition with redearth and red earth* from 2005, and *embodiment of red, version one* from 2007. And I'm showing these two paintings because the installation photograph shows the illumination coming from the side windows onto the paintings. And I think the architect, Renzo Piano, must have understood the importance of natural light to illuminate the work in a museum. Also, the compositions of these paintings generated and became the foundations for subsequent paintings. This is a quote: "In the Temple of Shiva at Chidambaram in southern India, in the dark sella, there is no visible icon. It is empty of any image., the goddess present in its highest form, that which no one can see." When I showed these paintings in 2005 in a gallery, I used this quote of Andre Padoux (41:19) on the announcement to echo the empty/full quality that I was trying to convey in the paintings. It had nothing to do with subject; it had everything to do with content. I keep my titles in lower case and non-pictorial so that they're designations rather than explanations, and so that they're subservient to the fact of the painting, and don't infringe on the viewers' experience. The painting should stand on its own strength rather than being explained. The explanation or content is wordless, and it reveals itself little by little.

IMAGE

This is a studio view of smaller panels, with—always with natural light.

IMAGE

And this is *cathedral series, variation four*. This is one of a series which evolved and took form over the same years. It was triggered by a first-hand description from the 15th century which referred to the colors in the cathedrals originally. Quote:

“Everything was gilded and painted in vivid colors, as resplendent as the gates of Paradise. Purple, rose, azure, silver and gold.” The cathedrals were some of the sources of my odd impressions of art, and as with most great art, they were beyond my comprehension, ungraspable and unfathomable. I had the idea in my mind, and eventually I knew that the same composition for that of *composition with red earth and red earth* would hold the paintings in the series. It took years for the colors to evolve and fall into place, and I’m still working on the series, building on the previous colors, and adjusting them and changing them, playing with which areas would reflect negative and/or positive in the compositions and which would not.

IMAGE?

This painting is small. It’s a little bigger than that one. It’s one foot tall, one foot wide, and it’s on a wood panel.

IMAGE

And this is a nine foot painting. It’s *cathedral series, variation five*.

IMAGE

cathedral series, variation six. Nine feet tall. Subtitle: *mirror to the other world*.

IMAGE

This is still *cathedral series six*, another…. I did both the pictures ‘cause… you know, you see it in different ways and different light.

IMAGE

And this is *cathedral series, variation seven*, which is two feet wide by twenty-nine and five-eighths inches tall.

IMAGE

These are four versions of small panels that size—eight by ten inches, oil on wood. My paintings begin and end with color, in color. The use of reds evolved into red earths, and the hues of these pigments have been the major endeavor in the whole of my painting throughout most of the span of the time I've been painting. They are the core to the existence regarding color of my paintings. Reds seem more difficult. They can end up being ugly or extremely beautiful. They take me further out because I have to work harder to find their solutions. Most of the red earth colors or red oxides are different pigments ground in linseed oil. Each pigment has different properties of absorption, transparency, or opaqueness in drying. I do lots of color trials of the combination of the earth reds on the small panels. The amount of layering and oil varies depending on what the total organic synthesis of the painting needs.

IMAGE

This is a nine- foot painting: *oxides are basic to all worlds*, which came from a poem by Clark Coolidge that I heard. It just struck me as a good title for the painting.

IMAGE

And this is entitled *soforouge*. In various versions of these earth red paintings you can see the shifts in the sequences of the red combinations. You can see that the full space and the empty space or the form and void change from one to the other depending on the strength of the color, on its transparency, its degree of sheen, and the angle from which it's seen.

IMAGE

And this—The *soforouge* is titled after the name of one of the pigments as this

painting is titled *pompeian persian.* In *pompeian persian* I tried to go to the edge of the red earth colors.

IMAGE

This is *version thirteen*. It's the oldest and it's the most recently completed.

IMAGE?

Again the red earth combinations of pigment ground in oil are at the core of the existence of my painting, and I favor them. This is my reason for using them. I've seen them in the various areas of the world where I've traveled, and… I've seen them in the art of ancient cultures of those places: Crete, France, the cave paintings, Italy, early Italian fresco paintings, the Americas, Native American…. And I've seen them in the art in museums from places I've not yet traveled but I hope to someday: India, Japan, China, Turkey, Africa. They're a humble, basic common denominator to much of the art that I love, and they connect me to it. But again, I use them because I favor them. These red paintings are the hardest to realize and they take the longest time; and I feel they go the furthest and that they are more unexplainable and ungraspable. So… that's it. The end. Thank you. I'm sorry I read most of this, but I'm very insecure about speaking in public and I wanted to cover—make sure I covered some things, so…. So if you have any questions… feel free. Yeah. You….

Question: Thank you very much. And I have a question about this quote about Shiva, which was followed by your statement that this has everything to do with subject….

SF: Content.

Question: No, nothing to do with subject and everything to do with content.

SF:{unintelligible}

Question: Can you talk about that more? What do you mean by that?

SF: I'll try. I'll try. I threw that in because I felt everything is so obvious, and you know, it annoys me when I see people over-explaining their work and making it so obvious in conceptual work too. And so I liked that because it spoke about something that you can't see but you feel that it's there. There's not a visible icon. And for me, when I'm looking at art, I feel that there's something ungraspable, and I find that element in most things that I consider art… you know, from all parts of the world, whether it's African art or Bellini—you know, Giovanni Bellini. There's something that you can't grasp, and it's so expertly built; but then there's more than that; there's more than just expertise. There's like a quality to it, and I think that has to do with the quote and it also has to do with emptiness and fullness, which is a balance that I'm… sort of --that's in my work. So I like that up (51:37) kind of quote that…. And sure enough, somebody came up to me and said, "Oh, I thought the painting looked like an Indian temple;" and it had nothing to do with being an Indian temple. It had to do with concept of emptiness. But fullness. Any other… questions?

Question: Hi. It seemed like so much of your handling of color and surface quality, it seems very precise. And I was just wondering how you came to this knowledge. Like how did you learn how to manipulate the pigment and the oil and the viscosities in this way that you now do?

SF: I think it was a long process, and I went through—You know, my roots were in abstract expressionism, and I was very influenced by de Kooning and throwing the paint around, and…. And then I—You know, when I was [in] art school I knew that I wanted to go deeper, that that was just the tip of the iceberg, that there was this

depth of painting that I knew nothing about. So I… As I said I kept looking at paintings, and I kept—I realized how weak my compositions and everybody else's were. With my contemporaries there was really a weakness in composition. So you know, I was… I think there's elements of, always, in all of my work, of, still, expressionism and rationale. It's like a constant pull and give and take. But all my decisions were visual, so I couldn't have all these visible strokes in the harmony of my paintings when I started basing them on a much more precisely measured composition. But I had spent years trying to only work on my stroke and the handling of paint, but I still had geometry in the back burner that I wanted to bring back to anchor the foundation of what was holding my painting together. Does that answer your question at all?

Question: Yeah, partially. And I was even wondering, do you grind your own pigment or make your own paint?

SF: Yeah.

Question: You do?

SF: Yeah, I grind my own pigments for the most part, especially on these red paintings, 'cause I can get the sort of in between sheen. The blues I don't grind. Well, I do grind some of the blues, but the blues are usually very transparent, so… you know, I'd have to deal with them differently. If I want them opaque I don't use oil; if I want them transparent I use oil. It's very basic and I've come the full circle with trying all kinds of materials, and now I just use oil and pigment. It works the best for me, and I still run into technical problems and… But oil paint is a very difficult thing to do. And so is any other thing that people do. It's difficult to grow fruit; it's difficult

to do plumbing; it's difficult to do carpentry. But I just find that it's a long path, a long, slow path in oil paint. And there are many, many factors involved, you know: color…. There are different contemporary paintings that—you know-- if I had a report card I would give Robert Mangold an A-plus in composition. But on the other hand his paint is thin; it's not luscious and sensual. But I admire his work a lot, and I… I also admire a lot of work that is not painting, like architecture and… you know, artwork from other cultures, like Mimbres potteries, or African sculptures from the Ituri masks, or Japanese calligraphy, which has elements of expressionism. And I'm sure Pollock looked at Japanese calligraphy, and I love Pollock's paintings. I think Pollock really broke through the barriers and no one could ever follow him. Hilma of Klint was a very important painter to me, because her paintings are really, really expertly painted, plus they have an asymmetrical geometry to them, so she was a very important painter to me. And Mary Benson, who was an American Indian basket weaver was a very important artist to me. Anyway, I got pretty far off what you asked me. But I think paint—oil paint handling does take a lot of practice, like playing an instrument; you have to use it a lot to get the feel of it. Some people are more natural with it, but some people…. I mean, even Cezanne, who I hold in the highest esteem of all…. I feel he started off slowly and got better and better by working hard at it. And I feel like I'm that kind of painter. I don't feel like I was born with this natural talent to paint; I had to work very hard at it… whereas Picasso seemed a natural. But I don't think he went nearly as far as Cezanne did, in painting. I respect Cezanne much, much more than I respect Picasso.

Question: Who would you give a bad grade to? I'm over here, Suzan.

SF: Oh, hi. Yeah.

Question: What painter would you give you give a bad grade to?

SF: What painter what?

Question: Would you bad grade to?

SF: We'll be here all night.

Question: You said you'd give Mangold a B-plus or an A-plus or something.

SF: I don't like to get into name-calling or anything .

Shout from audience: Do it.

SF: No. You know, I don't want to waste my time on…. I think almost everybody who tries to be an artist has some good qualities and bad qualities. We all do. You know, even Cezanne in the beginning…. His paintings were kind of crude in the beginning. Mondrian seemed to start off good and end up even better. So, you know, you just go with your eyes. I think some…. I think there's a tendency to over-explain your work. I like to see work that explains itself and reveals itself, and then I also like to know— You know, I like to read Cezanne's letters, because I like his work so much. So I really was thrilled to get inside his brain and see a little bit what he was thinking as he went along. But someone like Robert Grosvenor, they won't talk about, they won't over-explain their work. And the work is so strong it just has a huge impact on me when I see it. I mean Grosvenor's work is so opposite from my work, but I always go to see his work, because it takes me somewhere I don't know where I am, and I just keep looking at it over and over. And he only does like one sculpture a year. But he really thoroughly works it out and fine-tunes it, and it really stands for many, many… looking. Much, much looking. So I didn't answer your question, 'cause

I can't off the top of my head. You know, I can say…. Damien. Everybody loves to hate Damien Hirst or something.

Question: {inaudible}

SF: I don't know. You know, I'm sure he has—there's something good about Damien Hirst, but the price is ridiculous. I mean, I was talking to somebody about the—There's a little Duccio in the Metropolitan that cost $45,000, and people were complaining that it cost ($)45,000. And it's a Duccio, you know, It's beyond price. There's no price that would be too much for a Duccio. And then you see contemporary hot art stars getting a huge price and it's just completely ridiculous. So it doesn't have anything to do with art; it has to do with marketing… and hype. Yes.

Question:{unintelligible} question.

SF: Oh. Sorry. I'm sorry.

Question: I think we go back and forth with the mikes.

SF: I'm looking the wrong way. Sorry.

Question: I thought—Through your talk, seeing your paintings and your process, it was interesting—you were talking about… sort of like an almost mathematical process of balancing the forms in your paintings… and you had sketches of the forms, isometrically smaller, and scaled them up to size. But despite that constructed quality, the paintings themselves are at this human scale, which you alluded to; and also it seems like the forms and shapes in them, the outline, follow the limitations of the length of an arm. And I'm just curious. It seems like an interesting tension between the constructed and the gestural form in your work.

And I was just wondering if you could speak more about whether that's something that has always been harmonious or something that you've pushed back and forth with.

SF: It's always been, you know, the two extremes, and I think that's a common denominator, maybe, with lots of human beings, of the expression and the rationale in the work and trying to build that into a work of art. And this is the way I've been trying to do it. There are very different ways of doing it. I think of Rudolf de Crignis, who is a painter who… a contemporary whose work was built up of open layers of paint, and colors, and they sort of just hovered (1:03:05); they were just rectangles, but they were very beautiful. Concrete, even though they were built up of thin layers and it was completely different from what I was doing, but we both respected each other's work a lot. And it's nice to see his work.

Question: I guess I'm more curious to just… It's hard for me to—I get a feeling that there's one thing leading the other in some cases. And I'm just curious if you could maybe speak about a specific example of that. I mean just the notion of trying to map out and construct something that then seems so gestural….

SF: Well, I—You know, when I was doing more gestural expressionist painting and building—I was building up thin layers of paint too… I… did start inching my way back into geometry to hold the painting. And the first one I did, I remember it kind of was the length of my arm across the top of the painting. It wasn't based on a mathematical formula; it was just simply how far I could reach with the paintbrush. And so that started my curve across the top of the painting, and the rest of the painting developed from that. Buy, you know, I don't think that's so interesting.

Question: I guess…. Sorry to keep pushing with this.

SF: Yeah, go ahead.

Question: I guess it's just…. It seems like …. I guess I'm curious to what end…. I mean it' seems like that works, to do that, and to actually make—to make the gesture unplanned. And seeing the early work, it seemed like it did make successful paintings. And you did allude to—I mean there's been many allusions to looking at other work and understanding ideas about composition that make the painting better. And I guess that idea of better… and this idea of like improving the gesture is something…. I'm curious to what end. Like is there something there that you're trying to pull out, or—by making it better, or{unintelligible}

SF: Well, they're all ingredients of the unity of the painting: the touch, the handling of the paint, the measure, the foundation. They're all the ingredients, you know, and I'm trying to orchestrate them into making a painting that hopefully conveys art to the viewer. And I don't know…. But, you know…. Is that--? Does that satisfy what you're asking me? No?

Question: I'm going to find you later.

SF: Okay. Okay.

Question: Hi, Suzan.

SF: Oh, okay.

Question: I had a question about this issue of difficulty. Like you kept like sort of saying, "It's extremely difficult, what I do." And when I think about these paintings, what I find more appealing about them is just an idea of accessibility. Like, "Look. That's all it is. It's…. You know, it's the shape." Like when I look at this I would be

like, “Oh, the wonderful thing about it is that anyone could, like make a shape. And to make… you know, do different things with color around that shape, or something>” You know what I mean? So I think it would be a more beautiful thing to think about this as extremely easy. Think about it as a democratic thing instead of this thing about like… how difficult it is or something. You know? Does that make any sense? And I just wanted to know why you insist on that.

SF: Why I said{unintelligible}?

Question: Yeah, why you insist on that this is hard to do….

SF: It’s just my personal experience, you know. Take it or leave it. Just something I said. I wouldn’t read too much into it. You know, it’s just a thing like “It’s a hot day, or….” You know, it’s…. “been a long, hard….” “trek up the mountain.” And you know, it’s your interpretation if you see the painting. You know, you have to see the painting. You can’t base what you’re saying on looking at a reproduction. So… you’re free to interpret it however you want to when you see the painting.

Question: It’s not that I’m saying it’s not difficult. I just don’t understand what about making it difficult would make the painting better.

SF: Well are you a painter?

Question: Wouldn’t the painting be better if it were easy?

SF: Would it be better if it were easy?

Question: That’s the question I’m asking, yeah.

SF: I don’t know. Yeah, I’m not making… you know, pronouncements that are… you know, that have to be, that are written in stone. I’m just…. In fact, that’s why I don’t like to talk about painting. I really don’t like to give talks. I like to let the work

explain itself and communicate with the viewer itself, because I don't want to impose my take on things onto what you're seeing.

Question: Hi, Suzan. Here. Earlier you were talking about good composition and bad composition, and how you felt that a lot of your contemporaries had poor compositional skills. So I was wondering if you think composition is something universal, as in irrespective of the—

SF: Composition is something--?

Question: Universally sort of…. You know, you can sort of put a value to a composition, irrespective of who is viewing it or who is painting it?

SF: Well, it can be many different things{unintelligible} many different people. You know, composition is a—That's why I did the{unintelligible} you can have a wide definition or you can have a definition (inaudible)

Question: And what would your narrow sort of definition of a good composition be? How would you…?

SF: Just look at it and figure it out for yourself. I think if I look at—I was looking at real, you know, paintings a lot, trying to figure out why I felt that some were better than others. And you know, I looked at (inaudible). So you can't just say—You can't define it for somebody else. You have to feel it for yourself (inaudible) I think that strong compositions stand up with time. You can look at an artwork over and over and over again. And if it's constructed well…. Like you can look at a Cezanne over and over and over again. And then some other painting, you see it once and it leans on the subject and that's all there is to it; it's poorly…. You know, it's just an idea or an illustration sometimes. And you can comprehend more and more the more you

look at work. I mean, you know, I think of Bill Traylor. You know, there aren't rules, because Bill Traylor didn't start painting till he was in his Eighties; and he didn't have any art school training. But he had an innate sense of strong compositions and a power that he imparted into his work that you can look at over and over again, whereas Cezanne, or Seurat, or… Manet went through training, they went through academic training and they have a strong composition and beautiful handling of paint through their education. So I think all cultures have art in some sense, that it's a human endeavor that we all have in common. We have to have art. Some people think that art is useless, and they're totally wrong; 'cause can you imagine a world without art or music or poetry? It would be sad. You know, it's part of being human. More? Somebody else have….

Question: I wanted to ask about setting.

SF: About--?

Question: Setting? Where you place your paintings.

SF: A setting?

Question: Setting. Where they're hung.

SF: Oh, study?

Question: Setting. Setting.

SF: Setting. Okay.

Question: Where the placement of—

SF: I'm sorry. I'm a little hard of hearing.

Question: No, no. Of the placement. The museums, are they keeping up with you? Or, you know, it's so important where they are hung. Your paintings….

SF: Oh. Well, some—You know, some conditions are really good, and you know, I don't have—I do the paintings and then I try to show them where as many people can see them as possible. And then if they get sold I kind of lose control—

Question: -- control of them.

SF: -- over it. You know, I'd like to control everything: the lighting—

Question: (affirmative sound)

SF: --where—how high they're hung. But you know, I have to let go a little bit for the setting. But I went to Marfa, and it was great. I mean that's the ideal situation to have work be seen, contemporary work. And a lot of museums the work is…. I went to one—Years ago I was at the Fogg Museum, which is a very good museum; but there was a—you know, a de Kooning next to a Kline, and they were, you know, competing with each other, and I just thought, "I only want to see one at a time and think about one of them, and not see them jumbled together." So I think there's a lot of room for improvement in the way things are hung in museums and how they're lit. I saw a show of Joan Mitchell at the museum, and it was heartbreaking because she's a really good painter, and the light was terrible, the installation was awful, and it killed her work; you know, it killed the experience of seeing her work. And it was very… upset me. Okay, let's have one more, maybe? Yes.

Question: I was wondering if you could talk about how separating these paintings into two panels aids the composition as opposed to leaving it as one.

SF: Ooh! That's a tough [question]. That's [a] good one. Challenging. (light laughter) Well, I was working, you know, in one… one panel. And I wanted to make the paintings as big as I could so… I stacked one on top of the other, and so it was nine

feet. I liked the nine-foot size, 'cause you kind of had to look up. You felt like you were surrounded by the painting; it had a…. And I insist on the large paintings even though, you know, sometimes people say, "Oh, you know, [large]. You have to be big. And you're American, everything has to be big." And I like small paintings too, but the scale is very important to these large paintings for—and it's for the viewer, the way they perceive the painting. But anyway, I tried—I wanted to make them bigger, and so stacking one on the other I could still generate my composition from the format; and I liked that relationship, that proportion. It's…. And when I was first ready to do it I went to the carpet pages of the Lindisfarne Gospels, and I looked and I kind of figured out that the proportion of the carpet page was pretty close to this double-stacked proportion that I wanted to use. And that really helped to give me confidence to go forward to it, 'cause I thought, "Oh, wow, if they used it in the Lindisfarne Gospels it's going to be a good base for me." And it also has something to do with Chartres Cathedral too; that was kind of another reinforcement, that I was trying to understand the proportions in the cathedral, and there was a one to one proportion and then some Golden proportion. And so I was trying to play with two combinations of proportions with it. So… that's why.

Question: What about the seams?

SF: The what?

Question: The seams.

SF: The thieves?

Question: The seam.

SF: Oh, the theme? Oh, the seam. Oh…. It's there. Thank you{unintelligible}.

END OF RECORDING