



Smithsonian  
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Oral history interview with Alfonso  
Ossorio, 1968 November 19

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Alfonso Ossorio on November 19, 1968. The interview was conducted in New York by Forrest Selvig for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

FORREST SELVIG: This is an interview with Alfonso Ossorio in the home of his brother in New York City. Alfonso, I'd like to ask you first about your early life, where you were born and so on.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: I was born in the Philippines, in Manila, in 1916.

FORREST SELVIG: Can you remember in your early childhood when you first began to react to art?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Yes, I think I can remember very clearly certain things in Manila, before I left for Europe. One was the decoration in the churches – at that time there was still Spanish Colonial decoration in the older churches in the walled cities. Of course it was all destroyed during the war when Manila was so devastated. Another was the reproductions in European magazines that one would receive out there. As a matter of fact, I remember being severely punished for cutting out pictures of paintings for my own private scrapbook.

FORREST SELVIG: You were quite young when this was happening?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Oh yes. I left the Philippines before I was eight. These are really childhood memories. And of the two I think certainly the reproductions of paintings was the more important. Seeing things in churches one took for granted as part of everyday life.

FORREST SELVIG: From the fact that your family got these magazines, I assume that they shared an interest in art?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: The magazines weren't purchased because of their artistic interest but rather to keep up with things. They were such as *Illustrated London News* in which inevitably a portion was devoted to art.

FORREST SELVIG: Was there anyone in your family who was a painter or an artist in any way?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: No, not that I know of. There was a certain interest in art on the part of my parents but nothing beyond the conventional interest in the most conventional kind.

FORREST SELVIG: Then at the age of eight where did you go?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: I was sent to school in England where I stayed, oh, until I was about thirteen. It was the English equivalent of grammar school, an English prep school, a form of public school. It was called St. Richard's and was run by John Keywell and his wife. He's a descendant of the Oxford Movement although a Catholic. It was the one Catholic prep school in Baldwin which is a nest of English public schools. Vacations were usually spent either in Spain or France. In Spain until 1936, until the Civil War. After that in France, mostly in the Basque country around Biarritz. Then at the age of about fourteen I came here to school. I went to a Benedictine School near Newport – Portsmouth Priory. From there, in 1934, I went to Harvard.

FORREST SELVIG: First let me ask you about the prep schools. Was there any –

ALFONSO OSSORIO: I was always interested in art – if you were going to ask me that – and in what art instruction was provided. There was very little really. What there was, was of the most formal, pedestrian kind. In drawing and would be preparation for examinations. Just as you would take examinations in music, you might take these in renditions of vases or plaster casts. Simple, fundamental, academic instruction. Of which there was no equivalent really when I came here to America. In England there was a formula for the instruction of children,

government exams and you'd get little diplomas in music and art. You were taught how to draw and there was no choice as to how you would learn. Portsmouth Priory was less formulated.

FORREST SELVIG: Were any of the teachers particularly inspiring?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Not in England. That didn't happen until much later when I came here to school. And then there was very definitely – a man called John Howard Benson who ran the John Stephens shop in Newport, which was the last of the New England tombstone works. He was a very well-known calligrapher and inscription carver. And in that sense my first passionate interest in art – rather than the academic instruction which I found very dull – was in calligraphy and inscription because of him. He was a friend of Eric Gill and Graham Carey and Coomaraswamy up in Cambridge. So I became quite involved in that group of men who were very dissimilar but well linked in the traditional meaning of art and the traditional view of art.

FORREST SELVIG: Was there any art history involved in these early years?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Not really, no.

FORREST SELVIG: Did they take you on trips to art galleries or museums in England?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: No. Nor at the Portsmouth Priory. Art instruction there was just a not too important part of getting you into college. Although one was naturally encouraged to look at art. Benson would bring in reproductions and explain certain historical developments through lettering from the stone-carved inscriptions of the Romans through the development of manuscripts. All that involved history and examples, in a sense the logical growth of the form from material and meaning.

FORREST SELVIG: So early in life you were determined to be an artist?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: I had always wanted to be an artist. And definitely by the time I was ready to go to college I was ready not to go. I didn't particularly want to go to Cambridge for four years. But I did. I was told to. But I was also promised that if I finished the four years and still wanted to be an artist that I would be taken a little more seriously. At least I'd have that background against which to make the decision.

FORREST SELVIG: When did you start at Harvard?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: In 1934 – I was in the class of 1938. I concentrated obviously, perhaps stupidly, but obviously in Fine Arts. And I enjoyed the four years I must say – the luxury of those four years. It was really the last pre-war class. The amenities were still fairly untouched.

FORREST SELVIG: Concentrating in Fine Arts meant that you were at the Fogg?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Yes, I was at the Fogg a great deal. I had as my tutor McComb, the specialist in baroque. And the thesis I did was under the direction of Willem Koerner, the German medievalist, a refugee from Hitler. At that moment Gettens and Stout were developing the restoration preservation department in the laboratories of the Fogg. There was an enormous amount there that one could learn if one really applied oneself and wasn't too much in revolt against the stylistic method of teaching and wouldn't work except to pass the exams. The course in methods and processes of painting was fascinating. And, it was luxurious to be able to do frescoes, to do work on vellum, to do oil painting. It was quite an extraordinary course looking back on it – one realizes how thorough it was. In those days one took it for granted.

FORREST SELVIG: What was your thesis based on?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Let me see how I had that phrased – On Spiritual Influences on the Visual Representation of Christ. In other words, before the image could change the religious attitude had to change. It began with the earliest image of Christ that we have. Only an undergraduate in hopeless ignorance would tackle such a subject for a thesis! However, I went into a fair amount of detail down to the end of the Romanesque. The rest, from the Gothic to the present was done as a synopsis of major, almost self-evident changes. It's still something that has never really been dealt with, although certain aspects of iconography

are more dealt with now than in the late thirties when most of the literature of that sort was French or German. Well, at least I graduated and I think mainly because of the effort I put into that. As old Professor Koerner said at the last luncheon, "It's a good thing you did that because you didn't do this and that and you failed classical art with an E." And when I protested that I had worked extremely hard he said, "That's exactly the trouble. You worked very hard but you didn't work at what you should have been working at." Something I've always remembered as a nice academic remark from a man who had seen both the German academic world and the American.

FORREST SELVIG: It's interesting that all this time you were -

ALFONSO OSSORIO: I was working on my own, but in a scattered way. I was doing sets and costumes for the Poet's Theatre at Harvard. We put on "Murder in the Cathedral." The first production I think in America - maybe not the first - the WPA may have done it. And that involved polychroming a dozen life-size plaster-cast figures in the basement of the study hall. A dozen! Also I had studied printing and engraving and various crafts during the summer in England so I was doing engraving as well. I was not painting in the sense of going to the Boston School in my spare time.

FORREST SELVIG: There was no painting offered at the Fogg?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: There was no painting in the academic course at Harvard, no. What practical work was done simply to give one a little more understanding of the difference between tempera painting and oil, or -

FORREST SELVIG: This is essentially the Fogg course for art historians and museum people?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: That's what I mean, yes.

FORREST SELVIG: And you went to Europe in the summer?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Yes. My mother was living in Europe and my father in this country. We would spend the summer months, the long vacation, in Europe. The official vacation would be at the seaside resorts of San Sebastian or St. Jean de Luz. But for three summers I went to a place in Sussex where there was a community of craftsman and printers of Hilary Pettler who was Gill's partner at one stage. Gill who originally had founded it had by then left and gone off to Wales. But I never wavered in my interest. I was always drawing and doing things connected with art. I would go to see as much as I could during these vacations - although in none of them did I really have a chance to go off and tour Europe because the summers were to build yourself up and play tennis and sun at the beach - no nonsense about going about to look at art. I was one of six, our age range was within 10 or 11 years, and I think Mother's whole idea was to get us all settled in one place and not have us scattered all over Europe. My father and mother were separated and my father, as I say, was living in this country. And while they saw each other, our summers were spent with mother.

FORREST SELVIG: As far as your family was concerned in relation to your being an artist, they weren't too actively against it?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: They were very much against it but my father had the sense not to be violently angry. Certainly every conceivable pressure was brought to bear. And if I persisted in being interested in the fine arts he would have preferred me to continue at the Fogg and to end up a respected professor at Harvard. That would be much better than the running the risks of - you must remember there's an old Spanish attitude that the arts are not really respectable. The theatre, actors, artists in a certain 19th century milieu in Spain were just not accepted. There was just no interest in my being an artist, let's put it that way. And then of course when I abandoned the more conventional kinds of art, that was really a different affair.

FORREST SELVIG: At Harvard then for the first time you found many people who were congenial and interested in what you were.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Yes. There was that group. Graham Carey and Langdon Warner I knew well in the Oriental department, and my tutor, McComb. But there were very few people painting, and the painting that was being done was not of much interest.

FORREST SELVIG: Did you go to the Boston Museum regularly?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Oh, yes. I knew Coomaraswamy and I saw a certain amount of him. And of course I was constantly studying art.

FORREST SELVIG: And you probably came down to New York and saw exhibitions.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: I came to New York and Worcester. As you can imagine, very little of it was contemporary work, it was mainly academic.

FORREST SELVIG: Was Santayana still at Harvard when you were there?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: No, he had left some years before. But I do remember how invaluable the Peabody was in terms of primitive arts. Freddy Pleasants was there at that time. There was no sharp line drawn between fine arts and the primitive artifacts in the Peabody Museum. In other words there was a sense of totality of human experience which I feel was very valuable. There were many people at the Fogg who still thought the fine arts were the fine arts and the rest were people interested in pots and shovels and old skeletons. The Fogg had no course in primitive art – which is an extraordinary thing to think of. I wonder if they have one today.

FORREST SELVIG: They didn't have when I was there but they must have now.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Well, I'm curious. I'd be surprised.

FORREST SELVIG: I'm curious how you kept up this interest in being a producing artist when you were so loaded down with academic work. And you obviously did well academically.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: I did appallingly in some courses. There again it was simply because I didn't – I took a course that old Professor Chase gave in classical art. He had four lectures on different restorations of paintings and sculptures that no longer existed. Also in the medieval field Kenneth Kohnen was very involved at that moment in the tympanum of the abbey church of Cluny, of which there exists, if I remember correctly, only a little 18th century engraving. And I was very involved in making a model of the tympanum that no longer existed based on the priory, etc.

FORREST SELVIG: I suspect that you must have found Kenneth Kohnen congenial.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Oh Yes. Remember this was back in 1935-36 – he wasn't as famous then. It's all come to fruition in his labors at Cluny. But he was certainly, in terms of a man with a passion and a devotion and thoroughness, a fascinating person. And there was a man – Robin Field – I remember well. It was a very, very nice group of people there but it was not the place for a creative artist to spend four years.

FORREST SELVIG: Well then, after you graduated you were free to pursue what you wanted.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Yes, but I hesitated to come to New York. I did feel the need of an art school manual and technical training so I went to the Rhode Island School of Design for nine months, partly because Benson was teaching there. You know, I would know someone instead of going to New York and the League. Also New York would have involved living at home. After that I took a studio in Boston and spent the autumn and winter of 1939-40 there. This was of course with constant trips to New York and a certain amount of traveling. In the spring of 1940 I met my future wife and left the East. We eloped to New Mexico in the summer of 1940 where I took a house in Taos. We spent a full year there. In the summer of 1941 we were up at Freda Lawrence's old ranch which was even higher than Taos. I was working away. There were quite a few artists living there still. Andy and Marina Dasburg I knew there, and Howard Cook and Ward Lockwood. In fact we rented Ward Lockwood's house in Taos for the winter when he was off teaching I believe in Texas. I should say that while I was at Harvard I did involve myself in other courses besides fine arts. Anthropology and a couple of philosophy courses. But to get back to New Mexico – by the autumn of 1940, as one remembers, the situation was very unsettled everywhere. My wife was essentially a refugee – she had come here after the war had started in Europe. And I think it was during the spring of 1941 that Betty Parsons came through Taos; she had started a little gallery in New York, it certainly wasn't more than the second year; and offered me an exhibition in the winter of 1941. That is why we really left Taos and that October I had my first show here in New York.

FORREST SELVIG: How did it go? How was it received?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Well, it was very modest little gallery, Betty's first. It was in the basement of the Wakefield Bookshop which was on 55th Street between Park and Madison. It was called the Wakefield Gallery – the building is no longer there. It's extraordinary to look at the chronology back of Betty Parsons. Remember the exhibition she had of her collection last winter? In the catalogue there's a list of who showed at that little basement gallery and it's quite extraordinary. My show wasn't badly received at all and a certain amount of things were sold. Of course that was the period when there were very few contemporary galleries in New York; there was very little of what is called contemporary modern painting being done actually. Shall I continue? I'm just rambling.

FORREST SELVIG: Yes, do.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: And of the artists who are still around I think – well, Stamos I believe had his first show then with her within the two-year period of, say, 1940-42 because by '43 she had moved and was in charge of Mortimer Brandt's contemporary department on 57th street. Or no, it must have been 1944 or '45 when she moved because I had two shows now that I think of it, at that little gallery. I got nicer reviews for those early shows – the work was much more realistic – than I did for many years. They were mostly watercolors, a kind of super-realism. They weren't surrealistic – I don't think they were. They were very meticulous studies. A number of portraits. Sort of typical of what everybody who goes to New Mexico does – corn and skulls. The skulls were done almost like Schongauer's 16th century German, you know, or even almost like a silver point. And I had a second show in 1943 just before I went into the army. The first exhibition ended December 6, 1941 and I woke up to the news of Pearl Harbor. I volunteered right after and was waiting to be called up – there was such a rush of people remember. But during the brownout as it was called, I was run over by a taxi on Madison Avenue. As a result I didn't get into the Army until the spring of 1943. I don't know how much use I was in a military sense, but they took me and kept me in. I ended up in a general hospital doing medical illustration.

FORREST SELVIG: I gather you were badly hurt in the accident?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Yes. I had a badly broken leg and it took a year to heal. I was taken into the Army for very limited service – I still had a plate in the leg. But right at that moment they were taking everybody.

FORREST SELVIG: Where were you stationed?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: The first camp I was sent to from Fort Devens in Boston was on the Spoon River. Literally. The camp was built near Lewiston, Illinois, which is the village of the Spoon River Anthology. The tombstones are there; you can find the spot. And that's near Galesburg where Carl Sandburg was born. They were beginning a campaign to preserve his birthplace. Peoria was the nearest large town, Springfield was on the other side. Chicago was right up to the north. For three years I must say it was a very, very illuminating experience. You don't know America if you've just been to prep school in New England and Harvard. Actually it was fascinating. But the first camp wasn't the general hospital. I was inducted at Camp Ellis which was for combat engineers, sanitary units – the most unglamorous side of the army. It was segregated, black and white, and right in the middle of the camp were prisoners of war of the Africa Corps, the top German prisoners. It was a very tense situation. And there were a lot of disgruntled kids who wanted to be pilots but were sent down to the field bakery. They were not happy.

FORREST SELVIG: You must have found the Army a very unpleasant experience.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: It was like going back to English boarding school, something you just suffered through. I wasted a lot of time sort of drifting along. But I must say that when I finally got settled working with doctors who were doing extraordinary work it was interesting. But at the same time it was a little ridiculous – I never finished basic training, never even took a rifle apart or put it together. I was kept only because they held on to anyone who could read and write and had some sort of education to use in clerical work or in what I happened to be doing. I wasn't a medical illustrator right away. Before that I was assigned to a field bakery. The Army classification system was chaotic. I'll never forget there was a very intelligent man, half English, half American, who had been brought up in India. He spoke Hindustani and Urdu and they put him in a field bakery! Oh we both got out of it by applying through channels. I never did get around to baking bread and never learned to shoot a rifle.

FORREST SELVIG: Then most of the time you spent in the Midwest?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Yes. The general hospital where I ended up was in Galesburg, the Mayer General Hospital. I had an office there but I did most of my own work in a little room I had in Galesburg. We were allowed to live off base as long as we observed certain standards of military discipline. I must say it was an opportunity to see Chicago which I enjoyed very much. But there were no artists in these units at all. There was one doctor, Bill Littler, who had been trained as an artist before he became a doctor. He is now a very well known plastic surgeon.

FORREST SELVIG: As a medical illustrator there would be tremendous insistence on realism. A medical illustrator does what?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: As you know, each general hospital has its specialties and what happened was that when the wounded person required further treatment after primary healing and there would have to be certain repairs, he would be sent to the hospital which specialized in that. At Mayer General the two types they worked on mainly were arterio-vascular and neuro-surgery, both of which are very difficult to photograph.

FORREST SELVIG: Neuro-surgery is on the nervous system which could be anywhere in the body?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: It could be the brain, the nerves in your hand, or any part of the body. It's simply repairing surfaces that have been broken, joining them together as best as can be done. I'll never forget the first major morning's work I had to do – seven ways of putting a plate in the skull. A rather abrupt beginning. From the point of view of drawing it was rather simple. The complex thing is when you get inside the thorax and operating on the blood vessels near the heart. I would start in the operating room making little sketches of what the doctor pointed out. One had to work quickly to get the point of a particular moment in the operation, a particular kind of repair. The actual drawing or rendition of the finished thing was done afterwards. I was not really prepared to do this – I should have had a thorough training in medical illustration. Years later in doctor's waiting rooms I would occasionally run across articles with my illustrations. So that in a sense was quite fascinating. But it wasn't the most exciting thing in the world. And it wasn't for that long a time – one and a half or two years. It was a good deal pleasanter than a number of other things one could have been doing in the Army.

FORREST SELVIG: You didn't feel that this affected your own painting at all? It didn't tend to make it any more meticulous?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: No, because of the physical problems of working while in the Army I was working on a small scale then anyhow. One good review that I got from Emily Genauer was for an exhibition of work I had done while in the Army. I had a show in 1945 with Betty Parsons who by then was Mortimer Brandt's assistant.

FORREST SELVIG: Was your subject matter, your inspiration drawn in those days from your military life?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: In a sense, but not in any really recognizable way. There were no renditions of Army incidents – nothing I had witnessed transcribed onto paper or canvas. It was in terms more of intellectual situations.

FORREST SELVIG: Could you give me an example?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Well, I remember one watercolor – sort of series – that almost looked like scarecrows, malformed anatomy; they all had their heads in sacks. That was directly inspired by a number of stupid incidents I had seen in the Army. I called it Sackheads. It had a wide application to obtuse, bureaucratic self-preservation in the Army. Or another one called Pandora's Box which involved a key unlocking a number of disturbing so-called evils. But it's curious now I mention it, there was nothing – I don't count portraits of the colonel's children which must exist somewhere.

FORREST SELVIG: Did you do those because you wanted to, or were you sort of pushed into doing it?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: I started doing bookplates. I was discovered doing one for someone in

New York and many of the doctors immediately wanted bookplates. With a funny result that eighteen years later when I was having an exhibition in New York, an ophthalmologist who was here at a convention appeared and introduced himself. He had been at Mayer General and I had done a bookplate for him – he later sent me a print. This is the small world department for it turned out that he's a cousin of a well known collector in Chicago. Well, eventually I got out of the Army and came back to New York.

FORREST SELVIG: It appears that you were able to go through this experience which was so unpleasant for everybody, particularly the creative person, in a way insulated from becoming too disturbed or frustrated by it.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Yes, I think so. Remember I did have that room and could do my own work. I was learning something in the hospital too. It was interesting also to see devotion and skill as well as the sloppier aspects of the Army. Perhaps one is wounded in spirit and doesn't know it until later when one has recovered. It certainly didn't encourage one to feel that one's work was very important, to put it mildly.

FORREST SELVIG: Didn't you miss the fact that there was nobody, really, who understood what you were interested in?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Yes. There were certain people to whom one could talk at the hospital but no one interested in the arts. And that was another eye opener; the absolute thinness of visual culture in this country. In Galesburg, and after all this was where Lincoln and Douglas had debated and it's an old center in that part of the world, there was no place to buy art supplies except at the college shop. There wasn't a bookstore except the college book exchange, they had classical recordings of the Book of the Month and that's all. And in Peoria there was nothing to see. Can you imagine Peoria in terms of art in 1939? 1940?

FORREST SELVIG: No. I can't imagine it now.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Well, I'm sure now they have a museum. I'm sure they have something there. But Chicago was wonderful. I didn't know many people there oddly enough, certainly in the art world. I didn't know anyone at the Institute, although probably if I had made an effort I'm sure there were people I had known at the Fogg. But by now I had to eliminate certain things from my life. If I kept up with Cambridge and the Fogg I wasn't going to get ahead with other work. You can't fill your life with both, at least I find it very difficult to do. Again, it's a question of perhaps missing something and not knowing what you're missing. Chicago has an extraordinary museum – both them, the Field Museum and the Art Institute.

FORREST SELVIG: Was the Art Institute then showing much contemporary art?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Well, it was much more contemporary back in 1940 – it was much more revolutionary than it is today. Well, then the next big step was coming back here to New York where by the end of 1946-47 a lot had started. When I came back I was still with Betty Parsons. But a lot had happened in the two years. Peggy Guggenheim had already moved.

FORREST SELVIG: Did you know Peggy?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: I knew her very slightly. I had met her when I was here on leave. She had Art of This Century, a very important gallery. All during the war this activity centered around her and the European artists who were here – Max Ernst to whom she was married, Breton, Leger, Mondrian. But I missed all that since I wasn't here. You know, it's extraordinary to think that of all the abstract expressionists I can think of none were in the Army. Certainly Pollock wasn't, or Rothko, or Newman, or Still. Kline I'm not certain but I doubt if Franz was either. Jim Brooks was. Still was working for the Navy as a civilian inspector. So in that sense I missed all the activity around New York. Many of these artists gravitated to Betty when Peggy closed her gallery. Matisse wouldn't touch any of them. None of the established dealers would take these men. In that sense I was right in the middle of things when I came back and it was simply a great surprise to run across people like Pollock and Still and Newman. I didn't have an exhibition then. What I was doing was not in the swim by any means. And frankly I disliked most of the work until I realized that Pollock was carrying on exactly in the tradition that I was interested in and in a way had bypassed the Renaissance and had gone back to a much earlier tradition of art in terms of dealing with forms and shapes dictated by the ideas rather than by appearance. I mean it's much more like the artists' manuscript or Celtic illumination than it is like David.



FORREST SELVIG: How did you come to this realization?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: It was a visual one. You see I hadn't met Pollock, and it was simply by going to Betty's gallery and seeing a show of his. I think it was as late as 1947 or '48 that I suddenly realized the so-called drip panels had an intensity of organization, had a message that was expressed by its physical components, was a new iconography. I didn't get all of this as coherently as I'm now saying it – it was a visual thought more than an analysis. And then I bought a painting, a big panel 8 x 4, of Jackson's.

FORREST SELVIG: I would think that your art history training would have been an obstacle to understanding this.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: I think it was an obstacle. Perhaps not as much if I had limited myself to Western European art, say, if I'd specialized in Spanish – Zubaran or something of that sort. But as I had dealt with that extraordinary period between the fall of the Roman Empire and the beginning of the Gothic when you have – well, I must not force comparisons – but there was an enormous cross-culturalization going on. This is exactly what was happening here in a different way, in the sense that here the primitive art was being absorbed more and more into a human cultural stream. You did have the Europeans coming here, you did have a man like Pollock – Jackson was very interested in – I remember being very surprised to see some twenty volumes of the proceedings of the Smithsonian Reports, obviously a battered old set he'd picked up somewhere which were full of 19th century renditions of American Indian art, everything from buffalo hide paintings, tepees, the sand paintings. But of course art history should open one's eyes rather than close them. It should teach one – unfortunately it doesn't – but it should teach you where your treasure is. However, the painting, the panel that I got from Betty of Jackson's was damaged in its delivery. So I took it out to East Hampton and met Jackson that way. Well, it was the opening of a whole new world with the other artists in Betty's gallery. For the very first time I was really living in New York and meeting my contemporaries. I had always missed it – had always been just around the corner. I suppose that after I left Harvard in 1938 I should have gone straight to New York. I didn't and it's probably just as well – there was precious little going on here then. Well, the summer of 1949 I spent in East Hampton. I saw a good deal of Lee and Jackson. I met him just after he had stopped drinking and so I knew him for two years as a teetotaler. I knew and saw most of him when he was not drinking at all.

FORREST SELVIG: Perhaps he then had most to give in the way of verbal –

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Well, he was extremely silent most of the time. Drank gallons of coffee. Yes, he had a great deal to give. Also what is vulgarly called the classical drip period is the product of those two years of work. In the meantime there were other things going on, including the fact that I'd been asked by my family to go back to the Philippines to decorate a church that was being built as a memorial after the war; not a useless memorial by any means but right on the site of the factory-mill complex that was destroyed during the war. Which was my family's business in the Philippines – the growing and processing of sugar. I went out in December of 1949 I think it was. The church was built by Anthony Raymond, who was Frank Lloyd Wright's apprentice and had gone out to Japan. Right after the war he went back and made a second career of rebuilding Tokyo. Well, he did this church, he and Rideout, on the island of Negros in the Philippines. In the meantime I had seen Dubuffet's work here and had become very interested in it and I had gone to Europe in the autumn of 1949 and had met him and saw him for three or four days in Paris. Also before I went to the Philippines I had, I think, met Clyfford Still. I spent eleven months in the Philippines doing this mural decoration.

FORREST SELVIG: What are the murals like?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: I would have to show you photographs. But well, it's interesting. It's quite a large area, 36 by 20 yards as I recall. There were some drawings very free and quite wild. The iconography is very complex. Then the cube of the sanctuary is 36 feet with the back wall and all of the ceiling including a clerestory window. It's hard edge figurative sort of. An interesting thing is that while I was there I worked on the mural during the day, and since there was nothing to do in the evenings I did a series of watercolors that were completely different from the mural. That was a series I continued into 1951 and used in my text – that little book.

FORREST SELVIG: Was the style you used in the church more or less dictated?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: No, I was given a free hand as to the iconography. Of course it had to be a Christian subject.

FORREST SELVIG: And it had to be recognizable?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: It's recognizable. It's pretty fierce. Quite frankly, had one not been paying the piper one could not have called the tune that easily. In other words, it was one of my brothers who was in charge of the whole operation. If he hadn't been behind me the committee of the local bishop or parish priest would very likely have said no. And they would have chosen some local neo-baroque architect rather than Anthony Raymond.

FORREST SELVIG: Don't churches have to be approved by the bishop?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: I would say the rule of thumb is that unless you do something absolutely sacrilegious the patron who pays the piper calls the tune. I've never seen that to fail.

FORREST SELVIG: But isn't there a famous modern church in Brazil which was not consecrated by the bishop?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: That's because the architect was an avowed communist and it became a political football, not because of the architecture or the mural decoration.

FORREST SELVIG: What was the subject you used for the church?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: The subject was worked out in terms of the main action that takes place in the sanctuary, which is the sacrifice of the mass. I had a large seated figure of Christ with hands open, supported by the hands of God the Father that came out of the blue. Adam on one side, Joseph and John the Baptist on the other, Mary, and the beloved disciple, John the Evangelist. Then there were four angels of the Last Judgment, the four trumpeters. And on the beam facing the congregation there was the roll of those who are called, with the triangle, the old Masonic symbol.

FORREST SELVIG: Those who are to be called – are they the people who are saved?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Yes, it is the Last Judgment, it's a continual last judgment with the sacrifice of the mass that is the continual reincarnation of God coming into this world. And it worked out beautifully because the services take place usually very early because of the heat and the church had been oriented so that the sun would come in and strike the celebrant as he stood at the altar with this enormous figure behind him. It worked, if I do say so myself. And although they loathed it at the time it was done it is almost now a place of pilgrimage.

FORREST SELVIG: You mentioned a patron, and that your brother stood behind you.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: It was paid for by the family. The faithful were upset because they were used to, let's say, full church art. All these missionary outposts like the Philippines are supplied with an enormous business directed from Rome. When the cathedral of Manila was rebuilt it was done completely by Italian craftsman. Americans have never been able to get hold of that. Rambusch – well, they can't be bothered you see, with the other thing.

FORREST SELVIG: Well Rambusch is far more modern.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: It is now. It wasn't back in the early days of Liturgical Arts. Well, the mural was a shock to them. It wouldn't be just as much of a shock as if one did that sort of thing in Boston. You'd have everyone down on you from the bishop to the bishop's nephew who ran the stained glass factory, to his uncle who was in charge of frescoes. You'd be treading on those very tender toes. Well, but there I was. There was a young girl who did mosaics outside who was invaluable, Ade Bethune. And it was an extraordinary example of how much can be done granted one is allowed – I had assistants who were completely untrained and who were given to the art project sort of laughingly thinking that it was sort of a cushy job. Well, they worked harder than most of the people in the factory. And they learned. It was done in ethyl silicate which involved a certain amount of mixing of solutions beforehand. Ethyl silicate is really a silicone paint in a solution. It was recommended by Ralph Mayer, the logical person we went to. You see, it's a question of what to use in the tropics for mural decoration. You can't use fresco because of the dampness. So this sinks right into the reinforced concrete out of which the building is made. And with the exception

of one color – I still don't understand why the cobalt violet has turned an ugly grey-brown – it has stood up remarkably well.

FORREST SELVIG: Maybe you will disagree with me, but it strikes me that you have a continuing interest in religious matters in your work.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Well, one can say a continuing interest in problems which religion covers such as birth, death, sex – these particular aspects of humanity. And certainly religion is either revealed or human beings thought it up. The human being is the link between God and the material world. Which is the whole idea of the sacrifice of the mass. It's all one kettle of fish. Which is why I did these things called "Ego Dominus" many years later – a quotation from Isaiah, "I am the Lord your God." It is simply that it is all one unity. Even a little waste piece of plastic or a bone is just as much alive as the abstract concept of God, which is meaningless unless it is incarnated.

FORREST SELVIG: You mean that God is present in everything.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Yes. Everything. He has to be the sustaining force in the world. There's nothing heretical about that in the Catholic Fathers. Also it has nothing to do with religion in the sense of doctrine.

FORREST SELVIG: I feel at least frequently in your work there is a reference to something which would come out of quite a religious background, religious in the conventional sense of the word.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Well, I was brought up as a liberal Catholic in that at the schools I went to, particularly the Benedictine school, Portsmouth Priory, all the Catholics I came in contact with were concerned with the wider application of the great principles that still exist in the Church, I mean still in the extraordinary context of human thought even if you don't believe in it as a revealed truth. So that when it came to a matter of dealing with these fundamental problems I found I could work to a certain extent through the iconography. Actually this church was a difficult thing for me to do in the sense that I no longer trusted absolutely the vehicle, the iconography. But I did it. I felt I should be able to handle it emotionally. I came back to this country full of excitement of what could be done. Tony Smith was at that time an architect, not a sculptor, and a great friend of Jackson's. So we thought what a wonderful idea it would be for Tony to make an ideal model of the parish church and Pollock would do the windows. He would use a series of suspended hexagons like a honeycomb, like a hive. The idea has since been taken by other architects as a base. The altar would be in the center and the other hexagons would be interlocked and suspended. As it came up one of the hexagons would be the baptistery, another would be confessionals. Jackson would do the windows and the ceiling. A model was made. And there was a group of prominent Catholics who were very precisely in place – James Johnson Sweeney, Maurice Lavanoux, Father Ford – you couldn't have asked for a more liberal opener. But no response. It was turned down.

FORREST SELVIG: You mean they turned it down?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Yes! They couldn't have been less interested. It was extraordinary. This was in the winter of 1950. Tony was no help I must say. He just stomped out of the room when people wouldn't see the point. But they turned it down – "We can't raise the money for it. Who's going to pay for it?" Instead of beating that, which everyone knew was the problem, they were discussing the authenticity of the symbolism or the unity of the meaning and faith in the architecture, of the possible illumination existing in terms of the Christian ethos in Jackson's work, if it is the Catholic and universal church. It was looked at I would say with practically total incomprehension.

FORREST SELVIG: Even by these people? It's incredible.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: It confirmed what I've often suspected. Why the result of *Liturgical Arts* has been not that artists get more work but that Rambusch becomes more daring in quotes. That may be harsh, but the only denomination that has really started using the contemporary American artists is the Jewish and simply because they didn't have a church decorating industry. I can give you chapter and verse. The Stained Glass Association in the early 1950's invited twenty artists to do a four by four panel. The only artist who got a couple of jobs out it was Gottlieb.

FORREST SELVIG: Did Pollock have any real interest in religion?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Pollock had an interest in the meaning of what he did which he certainly understood. And he certainly was not irreligious. I mean he had no technical religious vocabulary because he hadn't been brought up as anything, but certainly in terms of aesthetic interest in things with which he was concerned I would say definitely he was religious. Religion is tying together as far as one can certain ultimate verities in terms of what makes up a human being, what makes up the forces in our existence. All these are things he did deal with. At least I feel so.

FORREST SELVIG: This was an attempt to get these influential people to accept the idea of the church and then to have it built?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Yes. To begin very simply, it could have been published in Liturgical Arts. Lavane could have done that. But there was not one iota of enthusiasm, just a shocked –

FORREST SELVIG: They were shocked?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: They were tongue-tied. Which I don't understand – except that in the winter of 1950-51 Pollock was still very controversial. It was before Dorothy Miller had his show at the Modern. And God knows that stirred up enough controversy. Certainly a lot of Trustees hated the Fifteen Americans show – you remember, the one with Rothko, Still, Tomlin. That was the first breakthrough; the one show which is really historical of the many Dorothy has done over forty years. But, as I say, we were presenting the most intelligent Catholics I could think of with something that I felt had a germ of great renaissance in it, possibilities both architecturally and iconographically.

FORREST SELVIG: To go back to your work – in much of it I am aware of a religious content. Maybe because I know you are I would have said it was Roman Catholic, but I don't know.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Well, it keeps cropping up every so often. I think that's very natural. I mean culture continues.

FORREST SELVIG: Now we have gotten to the point where you're back from the Philippines, you've met Still and Pollock. Did you have long discussions about art and what you were trying to accomplish?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: No. But with Jackson one didn't sit and have a long connected conversation. He would show the work, he would make very perceptive comments. His vocabulary was psychoanalytical in the sense that he had been in analysis and his intellectual vocabulary was based on that rather than on aesthetics or art history or philosophy. There was no difficulty in getting Still to talk, also Dubuffet. But in each case it was a matter of admiring but doing differently. That was basic to their positions both in what they did and what they advocated.

FORREST SELVIG: Did your friendship with Pollock help you to find and develop your own style?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Well, it's always a help to find others interested in the same things you are even if you haven't done what you want to do yet. At least there's a bond of interest among these very disparate people. I choose here the three men I saw most of and knew best and they are very different. Dubuffet and Still just couldn't be more different than Pollock but they had a link in common. After the Philippines I was here not more than six or eight weeks before leaving for Paris. I had been there on vacations as a child, but this time I lived there for almost two years, 1951 and '52. Naturally I saw a lot of Dubuffet – and also kept very closely in touch with Jackson and Betty and the whole scene here.

FORREST SELVIG: Did you feel that Paris then was as vital or as productive a place for you as New York?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: There was something happening, there was an underground then. Wols was dying, but Dubuffet was active. Michaud and Mathieu were just starting. Sam Francis was starting in Paris in 1950-51. And the very early pictures I saw, sort of muddy white, were very gruesome. Tapie` had them and I liked them. However it was not a question of the excitement of Paris so much as the one man – Dubuffet.

FORREST SELVIG: Did you work with him?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: No, I had a studio of my own. We'd see each other once or twice a week. And we took several trips together. We went to Holland and Belgium for a week, not to look at the old masters but to visit his collectors in those countries. It's something I've never forgotten – what extraordinary people like you work. Well, you can't choose your patrons.

FORREST SELVIG: I wonder if he's seen his patrons in Chicago.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Oh, he knew them. He knew the Paul Bissets – Mrs. Bisset was owner and designer of Maidenform Bra, a very strange English woman. She went mad. Went mad and had a room painted black and hung with Dubuffet's "Corps de Dames." But she was loony long before she met Dubuffet. It was very sad. But that's a long way off the track.

FORREST SELVIG: So you went through Belgium and Holland to see his patrons?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: More or less, yes. In Amsterdam we'd go to visit the epitome of a bourgeois collector and his wife. Enormous meals. And after dinner the men piled into their great sedans to drive us down to the red light district to see the sights. Once Ted Dragon and the Dubuffets and I went down to the nudist colony on the Isle du Vents. I doubt that I would have gone had Jean not suggested it. But it was interesting and very pleasant. Extraordinary people there. The villa next to the one we rented belonged to Christian Dior, his hideout. It's near Hyeres in a group called the Porterolles. You can see why it's been given to the nudists. It was an old penal colony and a thoroughly unattractive island. There's no natural water, it all has to be brought in casks. And there are no beaches, nothing but pebbles of various uncomfortable sizes. It is not a beauty spot except it has a fantastic view of the coastline.

FORREST SELVIG: The two years you spent in Paris you felt were quite important and productive?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Yes, but I broke it to come back here just when it might have become much more important. I had to settle and I knew I didn't really want to live in Europe. I wanted to live in America.

FORREST SELVIG: I would think you would find Europe a very congenial place.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: That's probably why I wanted to leave. I am an American and with all the passion of a convert I wanted to be back here where I really felt it was happening. In Paris I was interested in only one or two people. The painting was here. Betty was here, the gallery was here, life was here in that sense. And I still believe that. So in the summer of 1951 this opportunity came to buy the place I'm now living in, the old Hearst place in East Hampton. I had accumulated a number of pictures all of which were sitting either in my father's home or bank. I bought it but didn't move to East Hampton until the summer of 1952. I've been there ever since even in the winter. And apart from a few trips to Paris and Turkey and Greece I've done very little traveling since.

FORREST SELVIG: You moved out of oil painting into collage first, didn't you?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Yes. It happened very naturally in terms of my work. Right after doing the church and the series of rather complex wax and watercolors I had a sort of hard-edge period in oil. Then there was a period of paintings of contrasting texture with areas in an impasto white lead and oil – white lead with the pigment in it. Then slowly objects started to get imbedded into the impasto until I had to make a choice whether I would give up doing this or use a medium that was more suitable. I chose the natural thing which was plastic. To hold together heterogeneous objects on that scale you need a complex molecule such as a plastic molecule, a man-made product that was discovered simply because there were new problems to be met. And then of course both the possibilities and the troubles are endless because you are not dealing with a trusted art medium but with industrial problems. However, I have a strong suspicion that what human beings make human beings preserve. There's nothing inherently self-destructive in these plastics.

FORREST SELVIG: You have to heat the plastics don't you?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: No, I'm not working with that kind. Actually it's the least toxic of the plastics – the acrylics, their use is widespread. They were not, however, as widespread back in the early 1950's. And I don't use epoxy on a large scale.

FORREST SELVIG: How do you arrive at the parts that you put into the – would you call this painting or an assemblage?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: I have taken to calling them congregations simply because they all work together and the parts are unified to a final end, working for one final effect. But you mean why do I choose the bones or eyes or - ?

FORREST SELVIG: Yes. If one can use this word broadly, you seem to have a palette of particular items you use.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Yes. Well, the eyes are shaped – over and over again in paintings I've used concentric circles. Who is it – Emerson? Who said that the eye is the first circle. But certainly it has emotional overtones too. As you notice, they're not all human eyes by any means. They're animal, fish, bird eyes. And I imagine much of the material is chosen because it is what is left, it's one stage. You know, the animal is dead but it's going to continue life in another way. Either the bone disintegrates or it's fused into the picture. It's a step in the continuity. It's not dead, it's continuing. Everything has different functions. It's imitation of one's self or any object.

FORREST SELVIG: That again is rather religious thought it seems to me.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: It's more common sense. A lot of religion is common sense as a matter of fact.

FORREST SELVIG: I was curious when you spoke earlier of the Peabody and your interest in primitive art because I've seen a photograph of Congregations which will be in the Whitney Annual and that struck me as having an element of a totem.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: I hadn't thought of the figure as a totem. What often happens is that people bring to shapes what they already know, so they label what they see in those terms. If I use mirror or colored glass they think – ah, Southeast Asia. But if you like you can all it a totem pole.

FORREST SELVIG: I reacted to it as to some primitive art, that this besides being an art object is a repository for a spirit.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Well, in that sense I feel that all serious art is a repository for the spirit. Certainly a number of contemporary artists even state that. Think of Clyfford Still's statements. Or look at the press release from Knoedler's announcing Barney Newman's show in February – there's a statement that dates back to 1948. It's quite a statement in terms of what the artist is trying to do to infuse everyday life with spiritual values.

[END OF SIDE ONE]

[BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO. 25 NOVEMBER 1968.]

FORREST SELVIG: Alfonso, was there any other reason why you moved to East Hampton other than being close to Pollock and other artists you knew?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Well there was this extraordinary place that filled so many needs – the house and buildings – and also public places in which one could show. Larry and Rosanne Larkin were in charge of art exhibits at the Guild Hall and I was amazed to find older people who had grown up in a different aesthetic milieu taking the trouble to get to know the artists they were going to show, really looking at their work with interest and thoroughness that was far from ordinary. I thought this was a place where the community itself was interested in what the younger or more adventurous artists were doing. The same thing was true in Southampton where they had a regional show.

FORREST SELVIG: When you say regional you mean a Long Island show?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: No – by regional I mean East Hampton, Southampton, Sag Harbor – a very small area within a radius of say 30 or 50 miles. The first drip Pollock that the Modern acquired was shown and won first prize in oils in Southampton in the summer of 1949.

FORREST SELVIG: Do you remember who the judges were?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: The Larkins and perhaps Soby – I really can't recall who the judges were.

FORREST SELVIG: Jim Soby lived out there too?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: He had a summer place, whether he was there that summer I don't know. But he has lived there and has shown his collection in the museum. The East Hampton Guild Hall was sufficiently newsworthy so that their summer shows of local artists were reported on the art page of the New York Times. Which doesn't happen now. Perhaps the fact that Stuart Preston summered in Southampton had something to do with it. But no, I think it was that they were newsworthy in that sense. But the policy changed radically and Southampton became let's say more democratic than East Hampton because the Larkins no longer ran it and it was taken up by other people. It was in summer of 1957 – by which time Guild Hall was devoting only three week periods to local artists – that John Little and Elizabeth Parker and I decided that there was a definite need for a contemporary gallery in East Hampton and we started the Signa Gallery - the Latin plural of "signs." We ran it for four summers – 1957 through '60. It wasn't a glorious success but it was not a failure. It was reviewed in the Times and we had very serious exhibitions.

FORREST SELVIG: In the winters as well?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: No, it was a built-in impossibility when you're dealing with well-known artists who have commitments to galleries in New York. And the overhead was too much, transportation, announcements – all the things one had to do. We did manage to sell a certain amount but not to the people we had hoped to reach; the summer people who were not involved with the arts. The audience was the artists, people passing through who were already interested in art. Oddly enough, the purchases were made by collectors from New York; or dealers from the Midwest or other countries would come to cluster around the artists who were living and working there by then. I'm glad now that we took the trouble to print careful announcements of each show that was of interest.

FORREST SELVIG: You said that the Guild Hall began to show local artists in 1949 – would define a local artist.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: A person who lives there nine months of the year as Pollock did – I am a local artist. Well, it simply means people who were part of the community. Kline and De Kooning did not own property but they were there during the summers. De Kooning spent several summers there before he built the enormous place he now has. We tried a variety of things. We had one very interesting show that I think was called The Artists' Vision. It covered from 1948 to 1958. In that there was, for instance, an early Kline. A 1948 Kline is very different from a 1958 Kline. This was true of Guston also. Our exhibitions dealt with our contemporaries and it involved many prominent painters: Brooks, Guston, Kline, Marca-Relli, Pollock, De Kooning.

FORREST SELVIG: The shows were well received you say?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Yes, in the sense that we had a large attendance. And one show, The Human Image, was the subject of *Time* magazine's art page one week. God knows that isn't a great distinction but at least it was newsworthy and there was much less art in the news at that time than today. And I remember one evening we had Buckminster Fuller lecturing. It was one of the hottest nights in August and he talked for three hours on his architecture, on life, on his milieu. But the way he handled it! He broke it after an hour and a half giving those who had sweltered long enough and weren't that interested time to leave. Forty or fifty people stayed and then he got down to brass tacks. It was fascinating. A very moving performance.

FORREST SELVIG: What a marvelous contribution to the life of that area. I'm sorry it didn't continue.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: It didn't continue simply because after four years what had started as a pleasure, an excitement, became more and more of a chore. We were confronted with the fact that either we had to become serious dealers and plan ahead or stop. But we were not set up financially or psychologically to do it. In a way we decided that one only has one life and one can't spend it that way. Because you can imagine the preparation of four major shows involved a lot of work during the winter. But I have never regretted it. One learns a lot about what it takes to get a picture up on a wall of a gallery. In all fairness I must say that for better or worse we did not show the Pop art which was presented to us.

FORREST SELVIG: Pop was on the scene even then?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Not quite, but with our ear to the ground we could have had in 1959 or '60 early Jasper Johns. And if we had searched it out I'm sure we could have found early Lichtensteins. Well, we closed the gallery simply because it became too much of a burden. The fact that we held it together for four years on the scale that we did was extraordinary and it was better to stop then than to let it peter out as it might easily have done. We were still speaking to each other at the end which was very nice. But you can't split yourself that many ways. Time becomes more and more valuable and I just couldn't justify taking all those hours and days away from my own work.

FORREST SELVIG: The resident artists in that area I am sure must have come to the exhibitions, and besides I gather you had lectures and discussions.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Yes. Besides Fuller's lecture we had another evening of architects. Paul Rudolph came over from Yale, and we had Paul Estabina, B. A. Friedman who worked for his uncles, the Uris Brothers, and Frederick Kiesler. With Dorothy Norman as moderator. All of those evenings were well attended.

FORREST SELVIG: I was wondering if there was any aspect of the Signa Gallery which resembled The Club in New York.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: I would say not. It might have lead to seeing more of each other than in other summers because we changed shows every three weeks and could have four shows in a twelve week period. And we always had openings. The first year many artists helped in terms of getting the building ready. But I wouldn't say that it was a place where people could gather every evening. East Hampton isn't built that way. It was difficult enough to find someone to run it from ten to five without having it open at other times. No, it was just a professional gallery - but it did inevitably lead to the artists seeing a lot more of each other than they do now. Of course the situation today is quite different. There are several different schools or tendencies of art represented out there and they tend to stay together.

FORREST SELVIG: Why has that area become such a center for artists? It's not the cheapest place to live and generally artists aren't able to spend a great deal of money.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: It's not the cheapest recently, and even now if you're young and can do things with your hands and approach it simply it's not that expensive either. Lee and Jackson lived very simply, the Marca-Rellis lived very simply when I knew them in the late 40s and early 50s.

FORREST SELVIG: But why there more than other places?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Well in the first place there has been a continuous tradition that has survived. Then there was the surrealist group there during the early years of the war - Max Ernst, Peggy Guggenheim, Matta. And Motherwell bought out there very early. Also the area itself is beautiful.

FORREST SELVIG: But there is no sort of public meeting place for artists?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: No public meeting place. In that sense it's very different from Provincetown or even Woodstock. But people meet when they go shopping and on the beach. You can go to the Coast Guard beach in East Hampton and be sure that you will see not only the artists but a lot of the art world there. Like Madison Avenue on Saturday afternoon but without clothes. Again, back in the early 1950s it was a very small community compared with now and if anyone had a cocktail party almost everyone would be there.

FORREST SELVIG: Clyfford Still stayed with you out there?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: I have a small cottage and a barn studio and he used it for two summers in the early 1950s. He lived and worked there for two or three months each summer. He saw very few people other than the Pollocks. But he saw very few artists here in New York. And he worked very hard.

FORREST SELVIG: What would be the relationship between, say, Clyfford Still and you, or Still and Pollock? When he was working on a painting would you discuss it?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: No. He would certainly not discuss his own work. One was allowed to see it when it was done and the statement was made. And certainly he would never talk



about specific aesthetic problems in terms of handling of paint or color balance, texture, anything of that sort. And he is a man who loves to teach. He loves to proselytize. But it would be in terms of very large over-all ideas. Perhaps always it would be in terms of discipline, elimination, keeping the main vision in view. Well, his attitude towards his daughter – he used to come down in the evenings after dinner and we'd talk. One of the first evenings he came with his daughter who was in her teens and who obviously loved books. There were lots of books around and as she was very much out of the conversation I said, "Please look, the shelves are yours." I noticed her father getting a little restive but he let her poke around. The next time she came down with him he went to the bookshelves and chose three appropriate books for her to look at. His other younger daughter was on the West Coast with her mother - the Stills were separated - and wrote asking permission to ride. At which point Clyff became furious. "I grew up on a farm. I know how dumb horses are. I wouldn't dream of letting my daughter ride a horse I didn't know." It was the sort of thoroughness that is almost paranoid. But it has a large grain of truth. There was no need for the daughter to waste her time, she should be guided, she should look at what's important.

FORREST SELVIG: I can see that he would not want to discuss his paintings. Or would he feel that he had found his way and he didn't want to be distracted from it?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Well, he had been forged on a hard enough anvil so that nothing was going to turn him from what he was doing. He had spent years teaching in small state colleges in the Northwest where he would be mocked by his superiors, given a basement closet to paint in, and in many cases had to do the administrative work for his superior. So I think his whole obsession was, or any artist's is, under what conditions do you really work best. For him the optimum conditions involved some sense of power and control over his work. That is one reason he would not play the game of group showing at the Museum of Modern Art. Obviously it was pushing the new American vision. There was very little money in it and you were manipulated by the Museum – although that's a harsh way of looking at it. He spotted that as directed from the top and that he did resist. He knew himself well enough to realize the heartache it could cause him if he felt he was being part of it, although if you questioned him if he would finally admit that the institution has to win in the end, that you can't fight it forever. But he said that you can make a damn good try. Well, one result is that he's never had a major show in New York.

FORREST SELVIG: He sounds like a man of Calvinist principles.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Very austere. And it was totally different from the way most people approach problems with the museum. I've never met an artist who had the persistence of Still or the curious idea that one can both aim straight at a goal and be extremely devious in how you get there.

FORREST SELVIG: Were you ever involved with The Club here?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: No, I never really lived enough in New York. I went to quite a few of the evenings there but it was never part of my life.

FORREST SELVIG: How do you function with other artists, Alfonso? Do you discuss what you're doing while you're working, or aesthetic theories and so on?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Very Little. No. I mean comparable to what you recall in Post-Impressionism, or the Impressionists. I don't think it exists. Even with a man like Dubuffet. I think of the artists I know best, but this is true of the younger generation – it's a question of admiring but doing as differently as possible. Naturally there are cross-references that one can trace.

FORREST SELVIG: But certainly The Club was an attempt to create an interchange of ideas. It seems to be the only case I can think of in our time where there was an approximation of what was so frequent in the past. Why is it that today, artists don't do this?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: I think one reason is that the artists come from a much wider range of background than before. The Ashcan School, say, was much more homogeneous. And the Impressionists. And the world was much smaller. Diaghilev's audience for the great days of his ballets was 4 or 5 thousand people at the most and the great season in Paris was from ten days to two weeks. The battle today is this curious watering down of any form of complex quality. They want quality to be simple. Take the obvious example of Donald Judd and Flavin. Oddly enough it's interesting, but that's the best of it. So much of what they call

conceptual art is a mockery of the conceptual because what they mean by conceptual is a one-track mind, and God help you if you put in anything that demands multiple references or more energetic efforts on the part of the spectators.

FORREST SELVIG: Then you feel that this is something that is built on an immediate response and immediate perception?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: I think it's based on the enormous explosion of interest in the visual arts. Remember that until one generation ago the number of universities that had an art department of any size could be counted on the fingers of your hand. Suddenly two hundred million people have to be provided with museums, with art. And as we are on top of the heap and American art has supposedly come of age we have to keep providing new theories, new exploratory visions every five years or so. These are enormous growing pains we're suffering through now.

FORREST SELVIG: Do you feel that artists have to provide new theories every five years? Or is it maybe a kind of cultural obsolescence.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: I think it's that the whole society is growing up in public. And no doubt it's very healthy. The old problems of the academy, lack of understanding are couched today in a different manner. Here you undoubtedly have a sort of rat race bandwagon. You know, those who teach at museums, those who show at museums, the laziness or the natural inertia involved in once a list is assembled it's much simpler to make one or two additions and carry on the list than to make any radical changes. In a curious way; in a contemporary way it's the oldest story in the world. It's what happened to the Impressionists, the breakthrough into the vested interests, where your treasure is; your heart is. And that was true of Pollock. He had a lot of publicity, but before he died a remarkable number of museums and collectors and critics had not taken him into their hearts. He was formally acknowledged but he wasn't bought. And I think that until about a year ago not one major American museum had purchased a Pollock after his death. It was simply that the people who had rejected him in their young middle age were not going to accept him ten years later when they were more important. It's very, very curious. He is still very weakly represented in American museums. You wish that there was something that would widen the spectrum. In other words, the field of choice has been widened so it includes a narrow group of artists. And it's a whole new situation - this whole business of art and technology which inevitably is going to happen. But at the moment all you see are things like the Whitney show last summer of electricity and mirrors and gadgets not nearly as well done as on Broadway. It's curiously sterile. It's like having all the ads in Life done by one super designer.

FORREST SELVIG: But this is a small movement. It seems to me that in contemporary art in the United States the one great movement that came along and swept everything before it was abstract expressionism. Since then there have been a number of small movements.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Yes. If you remember how necessary it was to have another movement. I don't know if you recall those depressing days in the late 50s when New York was a morass of bad abstract expressionism. People who admired what was done proceeded to use it for the wrong reasons. To really do a good abstract expressionist picture - although that term is such a loose one - you have to have some sort of personality. You have to have something to abstract and to express.

FORREST SELVIG: But when the movement first came it was a great swell that swept the whole country.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: The whole world. Well, it didn't touch the Bauhaus. There always remained that core of geometric orthodox artists. And I think now there is a healthy return to some of the principles involved. There was definitely a reaction, an over-reaction perhaps.

FORREST SELVIG: I'm often puzzled about why that had such great success at its peak; why suddenly everywhere you saw abstract expressionism. Never before that I know of, certainly not since, has there been anything that so filled the stage of art in this country.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: You don't feel that Pop, Op or Minimal do?

FORREST SELVIG: No, they've not been so overwhelming.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: I think the abstract expressionist movement was partly because a new

mass of people were involved in art. Remember all the kids who came back from the war as GI students, the whole new interest of the public. This country was getting more and more prosperous and there was little art to speak of apart from the metropolitan areas. What could be better than a movement which told you to forget the past, to get out and express yourself. That I think is understandable. And it was a great liberating force. The mere fact that that had happened; when the reaction came it was a curious one. If one had wanted to plot what would happen as a reaction you could have almost diagrammed that it would be almost the opposite of self expression. In other words, you turn it over to a machine shop or factory. It was a very drastic reaction and a logical one. I don't think there is any one group now unifying the country in an aesthetic way as abstract expressionism did. And it's a sign of maturity that everyone isn't going to be swept along as easily as they were with that movement, which was a unique sociological phenomenon - the public receiving as a gift a way to express themselves. It's a wonderful lesson in how it isn't that simple.

FORREST SELVIG: It seems to me sometimes that there's too much emphasis on novelty in our art scene today.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Well, nothing is easier than novelty when you get down to it. If you have a bright idea and blow it up - of course even that is a confusion between an act of human audacity or courage on the part of the young person and the fact that it may not be that interesting. But the art world now in 1968 is still pretty much as it was in 1955. There's not that much of a difference - it's the same people. They're older and wiser and they are not going to make the mistake again. If anything they're going to lean over backward to give every young person a chance. Also it's much easier to deal with young people. It all fits in, the give and take on both sides, the artist, the public and the professional world. It's a struggle of will. They're all trying to change the way people think about art.

FORREST SELVIG: It seems to me it should be moving more slowly than it is today. There's too much emphasis on this season's star and it's too easy to forget last season's star.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Well, if we're going to take art on that level and if art is being treated as part of a continuous turmoil in culture, we're going to have that. It's going to be treated as the same toothpaste under six different names - it has to be remarketed every three years, you have to add something, and it doesn't mean it's any better. All through it runs this business of the uses of publicity.

FORREST SELVIG: I wonder who the artist is working for today.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: I think the artist is working for what he always worked for, himself above all. If that isn't clear in his own head, no matter what he is in terms of publicity is meaningless. But I think he is working in a sense for an enormously more difficult public. But I don't think it's more difficult for an artist today than it was for, let's think of someone in the 18th century - Chattron who was after all a contemporary of Bouche and the others. And you have this enormous range. There are those who say easel painting is dead. It's ridiculous. There have never been more easel paintings done and sold than there are today.

FORREST SELVIG: You mean proportionate to -

ALFONSO OSSORIO: To the fact that there are 200 million people in this country. And it makes it very much more difficult in the sense that if you look at the history even of the Post-Impressionists or the Impressionists, again the world was very small. There was salon and there was anti-salon. Now in the course of one season you have five major museum shows and endless protest shows. You ask whom the artist is working for. Well, the government still spends millions on official art which no one ever hears about. The church is still in the hands of church decorators. Occasionally they throw a sop to the artist just to allow them to continue keeping control over money spent on church art. One doesn't know what will be done for the Vietnamese war, but for other wars millions have been spent that have always gone into the hands of people no one in the art world ever mentions. It's amazing that practically no artist is given any public commission these days. It all still has to be kept in the hands of a control group. The Rockefellers learned something about letting the artist get out of hand back in the days of Rockefeller Center - Rivera, the famous case. And there were other incidents. As long as it's kept safely in the circuit of museums, galleries, collectors you can keep pretty stern control over what's being done.

FORREST SELVIG: But the attempt from the point of view of the museum, most museums,

would be to uphold a level of quality. From a commercial gallery point of view it may be promoting sales.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Yes. But if the gallery has any integrity or intelligence it knows it has to work through a world that knows quality. The gallery does the winnowing out as opposed to the museum. Alas, I don't think there are many museums that lead the way. The only ones that seem to be here in New York, but that's because the others are not given opportunities - I don't know - there are perhaps better shows all over the country than one sees in New York. Would you say that?

FORREST SELVIG: No, in general the most extraordinary things and the widest choice you will find in New York.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Certainly the tastemakers are here; the imprimatur is given here.

FORREST SELVIG: Exactly. And the magazines are published here.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: But in the sense of total enrichment who does the artist work for. He's working to pull together and then give back as much as he can in terms of well, creating a new myth, a new ethos, whatever you want to call it, and incorporating as much as he can out of this so-called fragmented civilization. I don't think we're any more fragmented than anyone else - it's just that a lot of things are opening out rather than closing down. It's not an age of collapse. It's an age of growth. Unfortunately everyone talks about what is dying. They should talk about what is growing out of what has to change to allow new things.

FORREST SELVIG: You're very optimistic in your world view.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Not all that optimistic, but I think that human beings don't want to kill themselves necessarily. But they also are not going to stop investigating the nature of the human being. I'm a conservative person in many ways, but one has to allow things to change if you want to keep essentials the same. You can't make a mistake and then compound it by hitting the person over the head. Had people given way a little in Cuba, America wouldn't have this problem.

FORREST SELVIG: There's no doubt that we're living through a period of immense social change. Would you say that the arts are mirroring this?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Yes, and perhaps that's unfortunate. The artist should be a beacon, a person who can pull together enough from all these different disciplines into his own and create something that people will no longer need the myths that we have in a curious way discredited. Of course the great temptation there is to throw away that invaluable human part of myth, or religion, or tradition, or whatever you wish to call it. In the product of human striving and suffering and revolution one of the great dangers is to oversimplify. There comes a point when less is no longer more. And it's only good, rich men like Mies van der Rohe can say that. My God, he came out of that powder keg of Europe which was so full of every culture, and we're just seeing the end of that incredible period of 19th and early 20th century Europe; the men who made our civilization today. God knows the other side of that was the most calamitous war, the most incredible exploitation of opening the rest of the world. On all of this the artist has to focus in the way a lens focuses a ray of sunlight to make the thing underneath burn.

FORREST SELVIG: But how does the artist do this?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: They each do it in different ways. I know what I am trying to do. Which is that in the first place one must change the rules of the medium as far as is necessary to express what one wants. I have been using things that are as disparate as possible. They're not the normal things of a work of art. Matter does continue to exist and have another function when you use it differently. It just doesn't disappear and die. If you want to do what Still did, which is to eliminate as much as possible, you are left with the individual and his very personal suffering. Each artist has to do it in his way. I mix these things into a new homogeneous and cooperative field of activity. That goes for the object, it goes for the technique you use - which is probably plastic, the obvious means today of contemporary use. It doesn't mean it can't be done with just oil and turpentine and pigment colors.

FORREST SELVIG: This projects into a philosophy with you?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Every artist projects a philosophy in everything he does. Look at Rembrandt, not only his self-portrait but what he did with his neighbors in terms of portraiture, in terms of grandeur. Or Pollock. What is called the drip period was an attempt really to incarnate energy in a visual form, to have a concept of what energy means. Then on the other side, in the black and white paintings, he showed both the complexity and the simplicity of psychological states.

FORREST SELVIG: Would you say that the average viewer of Pollock would understand this?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: The average viewer has never been taught to look at any painting in that way. Which I think is unfortunate. People are visually illiterate. They don't like to read pictures. They don't like to learn that much through the eye or attach that much importance to the image. Of course the irony to me is that the young painter who does nothing but the primacy of the shape and the color are the very people who cannot put on a show without reams of printed pabulum - and it is philosophical pabulum - being written to describe it. The critic who spends four pages describing how a line moves diagonally across from left center to right middle is ridiculous. That is always taken for granted in any decent painting. However, the public would love to be able to say more about [it - Ed.], to see more into the work than exists. You were going to ask me if people attach this much importance to a work of art?

FORREST SELVIG: Yes.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: I think so in the sense that they have to attach importance to any human activity. We are part of nature; the work of art is part of nature. It has to be done by an individual but it must communicate with others. Perhaps I'm being optimistic but I feel if human energy goes into a work of art sooner or later it radiates back. And when you look at artifacts of the past of the separate cultures that we are now allowed to accept as works of art, I think that does come through. The same ultimate concern. This all has to be well done; it has to be a form that can carry the message, a structure that is alive to it. I think people want a work of art to be that important. But also they are damn lazy and they love something simple and sweet. We're not talking on that level. We're talking a little more seriously.

FORREST SELVIG: I wonder whether the language of the artist today has not gotten to the point of being almost a professional language which requires a certain amount of study to understand.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Well, people were never taught to look at anything as I said. They're much more used to listening. This is again part of the sociological problem in this country. You have two great iconoclastic cultures. You have the Puritan Roundheads in whose church there was never an image, and then you have the Jewish culture which is completely iconoclastic also. And my God, most of the art world is in the hands of Protestants and Jews. I don't say that as a Catholic, but it is very interesting. They are much more used to music. There has always been a tradition of hymns and choir societies, and of the respectability of music as part of the service. There was something always a little sinful about any work of art that wasn't useful. That's why New England is full of these rather touching early 17th century portraits. And all the silver - well, you never see a museum in Europe so full of artifacts as you do here. Art being all right as long as it's useful.

FORREST SELVIG: In a society which is dominated neither by the Protestant nor the Judaic ethic would one find more understanding of art?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Let's put it this way. No country is in the position America is in where art is supposed to be everyone's heritage. Yet it's a country that is so empty of art when you think of Europe and South America and the Orient. This question has never arisen except in this country I would say. Give us time. It's just about a generation since the end of the Second World War.

FORREST SELVIG: You mentioned South America which is mostly Catholic, and the Catholic tradition is to decorate churches. Good art or bad it's part of the common experience of the people, of everyone.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Yes. Well, think of the way Mexico has treated its contemporary artists. It's a very alive part of the society. Even to the modern buildings, the modern polychroming in Mexico City is part of a continuing heritage where they are much more relaxed about art

than we are here.

FORREST SELVIG: But it seems to me that in Italy, which certainly has a glorious tradition, so much of what is being done now, especially in the churches, is quite bad.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Because the Church does not appeal to that portion of the human race that is really spiritual in the sense of art. It doesn't attract the best writers. A person who is pursuing the role of an artist and trying to get to the bottom, from the bottom to the top of things, as far as he can is liable to eliminate the entire Judeo-Christian myth. Because in many cases the immediate contacts he has with it are so grotesquely unfair and because the really great philosophical truths are things that he will find in another way.

FORREST SELVIG: How in the world can we eliminate the Judeo-Christian myth?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: You don't. It has to be absorbed and come out; it has to be part of this continuing growth. People can say they eliminate it. I think the Cubists in a sense eliminated it. The Dadaists eliminated it. To go further back, the Impressionists eliminated it by ignoring it. You have a great sense of life and wonder in Vuillard and Bonnard, but there is very little of the Judeo-Christian except in terms of reverence for human beings. And even a man like Still with all his ranting about the new untrodden paths - well, if it hadn't been for good, tough, Calvinist revolt against the Catholics you wouldn't have that respect for one man's decision of freedom. And on what grounds does the public understand anything except on the grounds of working for it?

FORREST SELVIG: But it must want to work at it. It must want to know.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Certain people have to want to know, then it must filter down. Yes, many more today do want to know. My Lord, there never has been a time when more art has been exposed, looked at, and even understood than today in America.

FORREST SELVIG: I hope there's more art understood.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Well, all you can do is show it. You can't make people look. If people know little it's worse than if they knew nothing. "Drink deep or taste not the Pyrean spring."

FORREST SELVIG: In other words, it's still a kind of elite process. Certain people will learn.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Yes, I think that's true. It's true of human relationships. But there is certainly some sign that more people are thinking seriously. God knows one doesn't admire everything that's written about art or the whole way it's handled, but there are 8 or 10 art magazines around. And the fact that art is not being used in public buildings; that our monuments are space ships and dams and highways - think of how small a part of the Roman Empire had art works. It's unfair to make comparisons based on cultures of the past when the premises of this culture are different from the premises of that culture. We're dealing with the first technical culture that has ever existed. No, I do feel it is something you have to work at. It's not that difficult. Children, even unlettered people have a great appreciation for works of art. They have a sense of wonder, at least a lot of them do. But when certain people have acquired a smattering of knowledge of art they will defend that violently, they don't want to enlarge it and they miss the point in having that little. It's a crutch.

FORREST SELVIG: Alfonso, to get back to your painting, *Congregations*, I said that I felt there were some elements of the totem, there was a spirit within. I persist in getting this feeling from your work.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: I agree that one of the things I try to do is to infuse into the inanimate a reference back to the whole hierarchy of human experience beginning with the material, using objects instead of just paint.

FORREST SELVIG: It was a philosophical choice that made you move from the earlier work into the *Congregations*.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Yes. There was no way of stirring things up enough by doing it with traditional means. Although by now there's nothing extraordinary about my doing it in the sense that a high school kid could do it who is handy with his hands and buys plastics and screws at the hardware store. It's simply a question of his mind working that way. You asked

me earlier about why I suddenly started using these three-dimensional elements. Well, let's take the use of the eyes since I've employed a great quantity in a great many pictures. They do remain concentric circles. They are a visual element in that sense. But they have the added overtones of being animal eyes, human eyes; they have all that sudden sense of dedication or power. They have multiple meanings.

FORREST SELVIG: In other words you want them for the association as well?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Yes. Just as one uses a semi-destroyed piece of wood. You are using not only the shape that was there before, you are implying the forces of nature, the neglect, the six months' weathering on the beach; or it might be a fresh piece of wood cut into a shape. Or you take reflecting things like bits of glass or pieces of costume jewelry. A certain type of mind will think this is nothing but one big piece of costume jewelry. They choose to limit their perception to that; they don't want to bother with other implications. But that was done deliberately to shock one out of the accustomed into something that is unaccustomed. In a lot of cases it backfires and people think it's merely a vulgar piece of self-indulgent display. In a lot of recent work I've used large areas of what looks almost like random color, which are from the pails in which I mix the plastic, or the jars in which the plastic comes. When the paint is used up there remains this extraordinary film of beautiful color which pulls away from the buckets like glass. It became apparent to me that what I was admiring was a totally different sense of order with rules of its own and could be incorporated into the canon of aesthetic activity. So I've used that in a number of cases. And the use of bone or horn - one tends to forget that horns remind you that people need living weapons. They are also things that are useful in their own right, used for any number of purposes other than what they were designed for in the animal. Then the two panels which have the Ego Dominus -

FORREST SELVIG: There must be God in all things - is this what you mean?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: In that sense, yes. It's as old-fashioned as that; or as new-fashioned depending. And God simply being a Being.

FORREST SELVIG: Being the universe?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Yes. God being existence. And the lettering - you know, there are three stages before you see the lettering. They are wooden letters placed face down in reverse and sprayed on a plastic sheet that rejects the composition you see there. The wooden letters are then removed, the letters are drawn in, and it's only the letters that receive the paint because you've already sprayed the plastic sheet on which the wooden letters rested. Then a further coat is put on and you tie them together and lift the whole thing up and off when it's dry, reverse it, and it comes out right side.

FORREST SELVIG: There's a feeling in the Congregations that I get from going into a baroque church of great color and splendor.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Well, there's no doubt that I have deliberately done that; used colors remote from the palette of everyday life.

FORREST SELVIG: It's controlled but it's within this larger hexagonal frame.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Yes. The whole thing is a series of controls and there's an inner rectangular free form on it that breaks out of that frame. In other words, within the octagon is a lot of freedom. Then the other element; the line that goes through the outside of the opposite frame right across. In that sense it is a series of framing and breaking out of frame and continuing the growth, the endless series and spiral of discovery, or the endless enlargement of experience.

FORREST SELVIG: Working into one pattern and breaking the pattern?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: As soon as you break it you're setting up another. And in certain panels I've very brutally broken it. In this room actually most of them are rather the more framed than the unframed. As you see in those large hanging panels there is no frame at all, no rectangle around them. The rectangle is a convention that evolved out of the need for a perspective grid at the time of the Renaissance after the Gothic altarpieces.

FORREST SELVIG: I suppose the rectangular part and dividing it all up geometrically had something to do with the importance of science at that time, their new discovery.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: And you had to have a rectangle to have a vanishing point unless you did it the way you're not supposed to.

FORREST SELVIG: I would like to see a large standing sculpture done by you.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: I've done a couple. There's one in the exhibition. It's something I really want to do much more of, but of course the trouble with a large, standing polychromed sculpture that comes in many pieces is where the hell are you going to put it.

FORREST SELVIG: Dubuffet is getting involved with that now.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Oh very definitely. I haven't seen the most recent things - I haven't seen the latest model of his great tower, this environment. But it's a natural thing for him to be doing.

FORREST SELVIG: It seems to me to be a natural thing for you to do, too.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Well, all in good time. It's to a large extent a practical question.

FORREST SELVIG: Do you have any artists who work with you?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: I have an assistant now, a man who helps me. He's not formally an artist; he's an artist in the sense that he's very skillful in what he does. But he doesn't have any ambitions; he's not an art student moonlighting. I do need someone to help me with the physical carpentry. There is, you know, a lot of carpentry involved. There's no time for me to do it and there's no reason why I should. In some of the larger constructions, elements like the projecting pieces all have to be cut and shaped, they have to be gessoed. Before I start work there is usually a period of several months when I am preparing the elements I know will be used. I don't know precisely what or how they're going to be used. But I would prepare, say, fifty bones; cut them, round off the ends, chop the side down, and so on. It's like setting out the palette except the objects are three-dimensional. Or I would take those balsa wood forms and cut them or remove excrescences, treat them, then they would have to be sandpapered and gessoed and even perhaps a coat of one or two colors put on them. Then you have all this material prepared; sheets of plastic - as in the case of the recent work - bins of different objects, the bones, the shells, the what-have-you. Then comes the actual work of executing them. I do a sketch of a background. The ground is done first. Then I place the objects on the panel that they'll finally end up on. Once that is more or less settled they're all removed, put on another table, and I put the pastes and the adherents on and work that way. Which means that always there is a certain amount of adjustment to make simply because of displacement of volume and that sort of thing. Frequently there are changes as I work on the final panel. But the major elements are usually all set and done before I put them in the final place.

FORREST SELVIG: Do you start off with the idea, Alfonso?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: The impetus is definitely an idea. Not always a verbal idea; many times it's a visual idea; there's a relationship. But then immediately it involves the total human being. The only times I find any difficulty in getting to work is when I cannot have in my mind a clear, balanced, or alive idea. I couldn't write it down and if I did it would be very dull. There's one panel in the present show, *Volviendo Alba*, in which the line that runs through is dividing it into two halves. It's the remnant of the first division of the female cell when the male cell impregnates it, which is the beginning of the human race. The picture is a much richer and more complex thing, but that was the starting point.

FORREST SELVIG: Alba meaning dawn?

ALFONSO OSSORIO: No, it means white. In Latin it means white unless I'm mistaken.

FORREST SELVIG: In Italian I think it means dawn. But these are all thoughts that are related to the human condition, or to philosophical positions.

ALFONSO OSSORIO: Or simply human positions. They have to be thought certainly not in terms of any orthodox theology any longer.

END OF INTERVIEW



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