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Oral history interview with Eugenie Gershoy, 1964 Oct. 15

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Transcript

Interview

EG:: EUGENIE GERSHOY
MM:: MARY McCHESNEY
RM:: ROBERT McCHESNEY

(Miss Gershoy was on the WPA sculpture project in New York City)

MM:: First I'd like to ask you, Johnny -- isn't that your nickname? -- where were you born?

EG:: In Russia.

MM:: What year?

EG:: 1901.

MM:: What town were you born in?

EG:: In a wonderful little place called Krivoi Rog. It's a metal-lurgical center that was very important in the second World War. A great deal of fighting went on there, and it figured very largely in the German-Russian campaign.

MM:: When did you come to the United States?

EG:: 1903.

MM:: You were saying that you came to the United States in 1903, so you were only two years old.

EG:: Yes.

MM:: Where did you receive your art training?

EG:: Very briefly, I had a couple of scholarships to the Art Students League.

MM:: In New York City?

EG:: Yes. And then I got married and went to Woodstock and worked there by myself. John Flanagan, the sculptor, was a great friend of ours, and he was up there, too. I was very much influenced by him. He used to take the boulders in the field and make his sculptures of them, and also the wood that was indigenous to the neighborhood -- ash, pine, apple wood, and so forth. So I began immediately to carve in stone and wood without any training whatsoever. At the Art Students League, I had just done some clay work. From then on, after the boulder period, I carved in marble, in sandstone, and in alabaster, and in ash and apple wood.

MM:: How did you first get on to any of the government-sponsored art projects?

EG:: Well, in about 1936 or 37 -- I've forgotten what year -- I moved to New York and got on the project on a non-relief basis. You see, there were people who were getting relief and then they established a whole segment of people who were on non-relief, but were still part of the WPA art project. My first assignment was something to do for what was called "first housing." It was a project to have a children's playground. My first assignment was to do some animals for that playground. I did a sketch of a camel that was very favorably received. Then I enlarged it. The project was composed of many types of people. A great many of them were casters, and they would point it up, you see -- take one of these little sketches that I had made of the camel and point it up into a large piece, three by five, six feet, something of the sort. And I would finish it, and patina it.

MM:: These were cast in bronze?

EG:: No, no, no, no, no, they were cast in cement so that the children could climb over them and play on them.

MM:: Did you do any of the mold making for the large piece?

EG:: No.

MM:: You just made the clay model and that was handed over to somebody else?

EG: Yes, to the mold makers. Yes. And then I was asked to be a supervisor, which would mean that I wouldn't do any work of my own but go around to the studios to see what the artists were doing and report on that. It didn't appeal to me in the least. By that time, the artists were supposed to consider projects of their own. There was a painter there by the name of Max Spivak who was doing a series of murals for a children's library that was to be established in Astoria, Long Island. He was doing murals of puppets in various activities, very, very charming. And I thought of an idea to do some figurines to go with them. First, I started with an actual figure that Max Spivak had in one of the murals -- an opera singer -- very, very amusing -- and I satirized it; he was called the golden-voiced tenor so he had a golden throat and things of that sort. Then I went on with various fantasies of this sort, not necessarily his subject matter. I have a whole group of them here, of people doing various things. There was one called "A High Wheeler," which was a circus fat girl, very, very fat, balanced on the handle bars of a high wheeler bicycle with great front wheel and small back wheel. She was very gaily balanced on the handle bars. Also, I did a very strong man, you know, wearing a great leopard skin and with a handle bar mustache. He was a very strong man and stood on one tiptoe and held up a baby elephant in one hand. I did quite a number of things of that sort. One was called "The Equestrienne." Did you see that at the art festival?

MM:: No, we didn't.

EG:: It won an award of merit. The Met subsequently bought it. This was a rearing circus horse, and again this improbable and impossible feat, the equestrienne was riding bareback, she was upside down balanced on one finger tip. This won the purchase prize from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in a show called Artists for Victory in 1941 or 1942. When I first came here, I got the award, and the Met bought that. I did a whole series of things like that.

MM:: What material were these made of?

EG:: These were made of a sort of synthetic paper-m�ch� which the casters and the mold makers on the project had evolved. These things had to be very light because they were going to be put in the children's library; also, they had to be very, very strong so that the kids could carry them about. Anyhow, the material they evolved -- I don t know exactly what it was -- was indestructible. And they were in polychrome, all painted in this fashion. And these were so pleasing to the Astoria people that they rebuilt the little library into an oval form, and the murals went around it, and the figurines were placed with them. I myself have never seen it.

MM:: Oh! to make it more in a circus shape?

EG:: Yes, precisely.

MM:: What was the name of the man who did the murals?

EG:: Max Spivak. And one of my later ideas was to do something for a pool. This was also in some government sponsored playground for kids. The things were in cement. I got the idea of making some of the designs with mosaic. And then Max Spivak was so interested in the mosaic that he became a mosaicist.

MM:: Oh, he did?

EG: Yes. And now he does mosaic murals, and I think he teaches at Bard College in New York.

MM:: After the circus performers that you did with Max Spivak, what was the next thing that you did on the government project?

EG:: I think . . . .

MM:: About how many of those figures did you make -- a dozen?

EG:: Oh, yes.

MM:: There were dozens of them? How long were you working on that?

EG:: That thing itself? Maybe a year or two.

MM:: Where did you do the work? At your own studio? Or did you have a headquarters where you worked?

EG:: No, at first, we worked in a headquarters, and then we worked in our own studios and brought the things in.

MM:: Did they have to be approved by somebody there on the WPA?

EG:: Yes. At that time, Audrey McMahon was head of the College Art Association and also head of our particular project. Harry Knight was my supervisor, and work had to be approved. by him.

MM:: Did you ever become a supervisor yourself?

EG:: No.

MM:: Then after you had completed this circus series, do you remember what you went on to next?

EG:: I went on to those cement figures that were inlaid with mosaic.

MM:: Yes. Where were they placed? You don't remember? But in some playground in New York City?

EG:: Yes.

MM:: Did you have any assistants to work with you on that project?

EG:: At no time. The only thing was that the mold makers in the casting section were absolutely appalled by the intricacies of these things. Of course, none of these figures or groups of figures were simple but were projected in all kinds of fashions which made great headache for the casters to work on, but they considered it a challenge and were pleased to be able to work the figures out.

MM:: What were the subjects of these figures?

EG: These are the same ones I'm speaking of that went with Max Spivak's mural.

MM:: 0h, I see.

EG:: Of the puppets in various activities.

MM:: I was thinking of the animals that were made in cement and mosaic.

EG:: One I recall was a Neptune . . . .

MM:: Can't remember any of the other ones?

EG:: I think one had to do with a large fish. I think one had to do with a design in a pool, a mosaic design that was on the sides of a pool. Then, there was a great upheaval, and those people who were non-relief were dismissed. Only the people who were in need were kept on relief. The project went on from there, but I was out.

MM:: Why weren't you able to go on relief and remain on the project?

EG:: Why-?

MM:: Why couldn't you go on relief and remain on the project? Or didn't you want to?

EG:: Because I didn't need to be on it. And they went into an intensive investigation of those people who had to be on it, and I had been originally non-relief.

MM:: What were you paid as a non-relief artist, do you remember?

EG:: Yes. About $22 a week, which was a great deal of money in those days.

RM:: Maybe we'd better close the window.

MM:: How many years were you actually on the WPA project in New York?

EG:: Two or three.

MM:: Two or three years? And that was the WPA, not the PWA?

EG:: Oh, yes, that was definitely the WPA.

MM:: Were many of your artist friends in New York on the project, too?

EG:: Oh, yes, a great many, including people like Bill de Kooning.

MM:: What was he doing there -- murals? Easel painting?

EG:: I don't remember. I do believe there were murals, however. I don `t remember.

RM:: Practically forty percent of the artists were on the project -- at least that many, maybe more. All the big

shot artists were on there, I think -- Franz Kline, Motherwell.

EG:: Oh, yes. All of them.

MM:: Who were some of the other sculptors that were on?

EG:: Concetta Scaravaglione, the scarab of the lion.

MM:: 0h, what kind of work was he doing then?

EG:: She. She was doing large sculptures of, oh, let's see; there was a girl, a child reading a book, a mother and child. I think she was among those who were asked to do portraits, figures of various people to be placed in post offices around the country or in public buildings of some sort. I don't remember whom she did. She did, I think, General Grant or some great figure of that sort. There was Milton Hebald, who now has a show in San Francisco at the Penthouse Gallery on Post Street. He lives in Rome and does great bronzes there. And he has done a great bronze figure for American Airways at La Guardia or Kennedy airfields. He lives in Rome now and works there.

MM:: What was he doing on the project?

EG:: I don't remember.

MM:: You don't remember?

EG:: Let's see who were the other sculptors.

RM:: Wasn't Helen Randall on in New York?

EG:: Yes, Helen Randall was there. Helen worked with me, I think, on the "first houses" project doing animals.

MM:: Was she your assistant, or was she working alone?

EG:: No, no, no, no.

MM:: She was doing her own design?

EG:: Oh, yes, each person was doing his own design.

MM:: Blanche Phillips -- was she on there in New York?

EG:: Not to my recollection. But she may have been.

MM:: She may have been out here at that time. Were most of the well known sculptors in New York on the project?

EG:: I imagine they were. I think pretty nearly the entire artist population of New York City was on the projects. It was a tremendous thing. Ben Shahn was on it. Stuart Davis.

MM:: Were you involved in any of the demonstrations?

EG:: Yes, indeed I was. We had a great sit-down strike for better conditions and more pay. About two hundred of us sat in the headquarters -- Brehon Somervell -- was he the head?

MM:: Yes, he was, I believe, the head of the project.

EG:: Yes, in Washington. About two hundred of us sat, and it was very amusing in a sense because we were all certain that we would be jailed. And we thought that all our private papers should be disposed of, so we tore everything up into bits. In some cases, people chewed and swallowed them.

MM:: Their driver's licenses".'

EG:: And then we were dragged out and herded into Black Marias and driven to a jail. One very amusing thing about myself was that I resisted arrest, and two cops on either side of me got me by my arms and ran me out. Everybody said it was so amusing because they lifted me off my feet, and I was still running while they were carrying me, and my feet were going on in the air, running in the air.

MM:: Who called the police -- the head of the project?

EG:: We were let off with suspended sentences. We never did get to jail, and everybody was very much disappointed.

MM:: Well, what happened that night? They took you down to the jail, but then didn't they book you?

EG:: No, no, we were all sent home.

MM:: Did you have a court trial?

EG:: No.

MM:: No?

RM:: You were tried right there? They took you down to the city hall, and they tried you right then and there?

EG:: Yes, but we weren't really tried. They had a consultation and decided to give us all suspended sentences and send us home like bad children.

MM:: Did you get any more money after this'?

EG:: No, I don't remember.

MM:: Who organized the sit-down demonstration? Was it through the Artists Union -- or did you have an organization there?

EG:: I believe it was through the Artists Union, which was a very interesting thing; very, very interesting. We had meetings constantly and fine speakers. Ben Shahn, of course, was one of the organizers; and this Max Spivak, of whom I spoke to you; and Stuart Davis. We had speakers like Meyer Shapiro, tremendously interesting; and Stuart Davis was marvelous speaker; and Shahn himself. I think most of the activity that was organized was organized by the Artists Union. It was the Artists Union which initiated all the reforms, the steps toward making the projects better, a better operating thing.

MM:: Did you have any exhibitions of your work while you were on the WPA? I saw a catalogue here at the De Young Museum from 1939. Here in San Francisco, there was a show of work done all over the United States. One of your sculptures was included in that exposition. I was wondering if there were others?

EG:: Yes, I think there was a great show sponsored by Winemaker's, and a great deal of the work that was done on the WPA was shown there. I had a show afterwards at the Robinson Galleries in New York, and a great many of the things that I had done on the project were in there. But, this particular piece of which you speak, which is at -- did you say it is at the De Young now?

MM:: It was at the De Young.

EG:: It was included in Fifteen Young American Sculptors, a show that was sent around the country by the Museum of Modern Art. I saw that show myself when I was living and working in New Orleans at the Delgado Museum there. And there was a show of watercolors in conjunction with the government-sponsored things that went from Washington. I got an award there in New Orleans for a watercolor that was bought by the government.

MM:: Were you doing watercolor painting when you were on the WPA?

EG:: On my own, but not for them. I was working for them as a sculptress but painting too.

MM:: Did you keep any of your own work that was done on WPA? You mentioned something about having a piece, or having some work that was done on WPA in your show in New York. I was wondering if they made some kind of arrangement where you were allowed to keep a copy if they were cast.

EG:: That's so. There were several copies made, and I was allowed to have a copy of each.

MM:: Oh, I see. Was that true of all the sculptors in New York -- if the work was cast, they were allowed to keep one?

EG:: I would imagine so. If I was allowed to do so, I would imagine they would be. I don't remember anybody specifically.

MM:: Looking back on that period, how do you feel about the government sponsorship of the arts in America?

EG:: Oh, I think it was one of the most vital, vigorous, and remarkable experiences I have ever had, and I was

fully joined in that feeling by everybody who worked on it. I suppose this has been said before, but it was a renaissance of the arts. I think some of the finest work that was done in the United States in that period was produced on the WPA, on the government-sponsored art projects. It was a tremendous thing!

MM:: Do you think this was true of yourself, that your own work was at a peak then?

EG:: Oh, definitely! Definitely! I've never been so productive and so enthused and so stimulated by the group activity, too, and the feeling of working together. I think many people got a beginning in their own particular work on the art project, which they couldn't have done otherwise, you see. They didn't have the means; they didn't have the materials; they didn't have the impetus; they didn't have the projecting that stimulated everybody. All sorts of people. In particular, I remember Philip Guston, who had been in a very bad way, got his start on the WPA art project. And so many artists. I could name endless ones who had the opportunity to develop with that beginning. And have developed enormously since. It was a glorious period, really glorious.

RM:: Did you know Louis Ribak?

EG: Yes, Louis Ribak was on.

RM:: Beatrice Mandelman?

EG: Yes, indeed. If you were to bring up all these people whom I have forgotten in all these years, I expect I would have known all of them.

MM:: How would you know them? You didn't actually work with them?

EG:: Yes. For one thing, they were all in the Artists Union, and we met two or three times a week. And we met all our fellow workers in the central office where we reported with our things. There were great social activities, great parties constantly, which were very delightful. There was general group activity, and part of it, I would say, was like working as apprentices in a guild. It was almost like on old-time guild association.

RM:: Well, there was a togetherness at that time that doesn't exist today at all.

EG:: No, no.

RM:: Which was quite nice.

EG: I'm trying to recall what the entire thing was called, aside from the WPA.

MM:: You mean there was another name for it?

EG:: Yes, in Washington. Do you recall?

MM:: Well, the Federal Art Project?

EG:: Federal Art Project?

MM:: Was this a new experience for you, to work on larger commissions when you went on the WPA, or had you done this sort of thing before?

EG:: No. This was a completely new experience. In Woodstock, where I had been living, I had worked solely for myself, as it were. Before that, I had done a group of portrait figurines of my fellow artists: Arnold Blanch, Lucille Blanch, Raphael Soyer, William Zorach, Concetta Scaravaglione, Carl Walters, who was a very famous ceramist, potter; Emil Ganso, an interesting painter, who was a protege of Jules Pascin. He had been a baker in Germany originally, had moved to France, and came under the influence of Jules Pascin and became a very fine painter. Ganso died some time ago. His wife subsequently started a gallery in New York, the Ganso Gallery. All of these things, the portrait figurines -- which were not caricatures but characterizations of my fellow artists -- were shown in a group at the Whitney Museum once. These figurines were about two feet high. And then I had an interview and a reproduction in color of some of these. They were called "fantasies," the polychrome figures that were done originally on the WPA art project in conjunction with Max Spivak. I had an article and color reproductions in Coronet and in The Studio magazine and various other publications.

MM:: Were any other sculptors in New York at the same time working in polychrome material?

EG:: No, I originated this.

MM:: How did it happen to come to you?

EG:: I think specifically because of Max Spivak's figures in the murals. I was working in conjunction with him, and, of course, I thought the sculptures ought to be in color. But I never worked realistically in color. These were rather like extractions which had to do with a formalization of color which was an integral part of the form, sculptural form. They were not done representationally, none of these things.

MM:: What type of sculpture was prevalent in New York during the WPA? What kind of work were the other sculptors doing?

EG:: They were doing, in some instances, social commentary, workers --

MM:: What material did the others mainly work in? You were probably the only person working in this synthetic paper m�ch�?

EG:: I was the only person working in polyùchrome. But the other people also worked in, perhaps, clay models, and then had the things cast and made large by the people who worked in that area.

MM:: That's a rather unique arrangement. They didn't have that out here in San Francisco for sculptors.

EG:: They didn't have casters . . .

MM:: They didn't have a shop like that where you just took your models in, and then it was turned over to craftsmen to do the rest of it.

EG:: . . . to point them up and make them larger, yes.

MM:: Was this a very large shop? It must have been.

EG:: Yes.

MM:: They worked in other materials besides the concrete, and the paper m�ch�?

EG:: Yes.

MM:: Did they cast in bronze?

EG:: No. At no time did they cast in bronze.

MM:: Who were these people? Were they artists?

EG:: No, they were artisans, craftsmen, for the most part Italians; casters who were also out of work and were given a chance to work.

MM:: Probably the reason they never had it in San Francisco was that there just wasn't that kind of trained labor available here.

EG:: Probably. New York, after all, is a large city, and a great many people there were out of work.

MM:: How were things during the depression in New York? Was it pretty bad? Sounds as though the artists were having a lot of fun. I was wondering about conditions in general.

EG:: Conditions in general were very bad. But for us, the WPA was a haven and a paradise; for the artist, actually, it was good to be fed and to be producing and at the same time producing very, very well. I think a great many of the things that were done on the WPA art project were done by many artists who are now distinguished.

MM:: Did most of the artists live in the Village at that time?

EG:: No, a great many of them lived in Brooklyn, in the Bronx, on Staten Island. All brought their work into the central office. And the supervisors were sent out to these various locations to look over what people were doing. Lucille Blanch was a supervisor on the painting project. A fine painter by the name of Irving Morantz in New York was one of the supervisors. George Picken, a very fine painter, was a supervisor. They all had very amusing tales to tell about the conditions and their experiences with the painters they went to supervise. I remember at one time Max Spivak and George Picken and a few people in that group were restoring paintings and pieces of sculpture in churches. They were repainting and regilding, and this involved people who were also well-versed in gold leaf and silver leaf.

MM:: Were there many very large mural projects going on in New York?

EG:: Oh, tremendous ones, yes.

RM:: Was there much sculpture done in, say, the abstract directions of Europe at the time?

EG:: They were beginning. They were beginning.

RM:: If I recall correctly, there was quite a bit of mural work that was quite abstract.

EG:: Yes. As a matter of fact, Max Spivak, with whom I worked, worked in a fashion that was very much influenced by Miro. And I think this influenced me, too, in the polychroming of these figurines. That's why I didn't paint them representationally. That's why I utilized them as a background in a sense, as a form on which to impose color which at the same time was an integral part of the sculptural form. It fitted in in some curious way. They were really abstract paintings on the sculptural form.

RM:: Was Anton Refregier on the project?

EG:: Oh, most decidedly. Oh, yes. And I think -- aren't his thing's in the Rincon Annex Post Office, one of the federal government projects?

RM:: That was the Treasury Department competition.

EG:: I can't recall for sure, but I think it was while we were still on the WPA art project that he and I also worked together for a large night club in New York - Cafe Society Uptown. He did the murals, and I did four huge, seven-foot, paper-m�ch� abstractions but real paper-m�ch�. And we also worked for Cafe Society Downtown and decorated it originally. My first project there was to do the "pillars of society." I did Elsa Maxwell and Cholly Knickerbocker and somebody else sitting like the anchorites of old on their own pillars, on their own newspaper columns.

RM:: Those two places don't exist any more, do they?

EG:: No.

RM:: Who was the owner?

EG:: Barney . . . .[editor's note: last name is Josephson]

RM:: I can't remember his last name.

EG:: Nor do I, but it was Barney, and he now has restaurant, a chain of restaurants in New York which are largely decorated by Refregier in different media. [editor's note: the restaurant is called The Cookery]

RM:: Oh, good.

EG:: Ceramic plaques and mosaics and a lot of, shall we say, objets trouve's in kitchen articles done by various artists to whom he gives these projects out to do. They are wall plaques made of bits of kitchen utensils, potato mashers, saucepans, and so on.

MM:: Did you continue with the polychrome sculpture after the WPA?

EG:: Yes, but I did it then in actual paper-m�ch�.

MM:: How permanent a material is that?

EG:: It is tremendously permanent. This thing, for instance. when I first came out to San Francisco, I had a show here of watercolors I had done in New Orleans, and I whipped up a lot of these figures. They were done about twenty years ago.

MM:: Do you use a lot of glue in it with the paper?

EG:: I use flour and water paste, and I make them on a frame of chicken wire. Then I paint them in egg tempera, but real egg tempera, the egg emulsion that is made of one whole egg and dammar varnish and water. And they endure endlessly. That is why I started to work in paper-m�ch� because I had loved so many, many things that I had seen in India and in China that were paper-m�ch�. Literally, some of the Chinese things were thousands of years old.

MM:: Oh, really?

EG:: And they endure. Yes. And then there was the process by which paper-m�ch� was made many, many

years ago. I think it was called japanning in England. It had been taken over from a Japanese process which was made with lacquer and paper. On some of the very ancient ones, the paper had disintegrated but the lacquer remained.

RM:: I imagine some of these new synthetic resins would be great for this.

EG:: Yes, indeed.

RM:: Are you doing much work now?

EG:: Not very much, no, because of difficulties in my private life in the past few years. I haven't had a studio; I've been moving around too much. But I've been doing little castings in bronze and in metal, which I do by the lost wax process. I learned the method myself. These are very, very amusing ones because they are so poorly done. You see this one here -- Aphrodite, in which the lead skipped and leaked.

RM:: Oh, that's very nice, though.

EG:: And that amusing little nose is one of the risers which one puts into the original for the air to escape, and then one cuts them off, you see, but I left that on. This one here has several shoulders and several bosoms. I just left them. I cast those myself. But now there is a wonderful new bronze foundry in San Francisco, Foundry Three, and they did this wee one for me and that was in wax. And a head I did of my sister, and they did that for me. Don Haskins did that for me and that sank a bit. But that's what I was interested in doing. I was going to do bronzes chiefly, but the project was interrupted. And Martin Snipper, the Director of the Art Festival, bought the piece that I had at the Art Festival and would like me to think of doing the great central piece for next year's festival, a very large paper-m�ch� thing of some sort.

MM:: Gee, that would be fun.

EG:: That one I did for a children's carnival, and it was my first attempt at doing a mobile. These are animals jumping through rings of flame, and they wag their heads and their tails; they are in motion while they're jumping.

RM:: That's a great piece.

MM:: Oh, they're wonderful.

EG:: They literally hang by a thread, carefully balanced.

MM:: That made me think -- was Alexander Calder in New York during the WPA period?

EG:: I don't think so. I don't remember. I don't remember his being there. I think he was in Paris.

MM:: Nobody was doing mobiles in New York at that time, I guess.

EG:: No, no. But David Smith had begun to weld on the project, very definitely.

MM:: Oh, he had?

EG:: Yes, I recall that.

MM:: Jackson Pollock's wife?

EG:: Yes.

MM:: We were just talking about other artists that Johnny Gershoy knew in New York from the project, and you mentioned --

EG:: Gorky.

MM:: Arshile Gorky, who did an abstract mural at the airport.

EG:: Yes, and Ivan Ponchekoff was one of the forerunners in the abstract murals. He was the first husband of Jackson Pollock's wife.

MM:: Lee Krasner?

EG:: Lee Krasner, yes.

MM:: And she was on the project, too?

EG:: Oh, yes.

RM:: Pollock was, too.

EG:: Yes. I don't remember him. But I knew her very well.

MM:: What kind of work was she doing?

EG:: She was doing work that was influenced by Hans Hofmann. She was one of his first pupils and thought so highly of him. She was tremendously enthusiastic about him. I don't know whether he was on the project or not. I doubt it. I think he had a school of his own.

MM:: Did Lee Krasner do any murals, or was she doing easel painting?

EG:: She was doing easel painting at that time.

MM:: You've seen some of the WPA work here in San Francisco?

EG:: I've seen it in Coit Tower.

MM:: Yes. How would you compare the mural work done here on the West Coast with the work done in New York?

EG:: I don't mean to sound like a snob, but I don't think it was as good.

MM:: In what way?

EG:: With the exception of Haler Hiler. Doesn't he have some work here?

MM:: Yes, at the Aquatic Park here in San Francisco. In what way would you say it wasn't as good?

EG:: I don't think it was as highly developed. I don't think the aesthetic caliber was as high.

MM:: Diego Rivera's influence wasn't nearly as strong in New York as it was out here?

EG:: No, no.

MM:: Although he did work in New York during that time. He was painting the Rockefeller mural about that time.

EG:: Yes. On the other hand, I think he may have influenced people like Rya Ludins, Marion Greenwood, who had worked with him in Mexico and had executed murals in Morelia, Mexico.

RM:: Who was that other woman that worked with Rivera?

MM:: Lucienne Bloch

EG:: Oh, yes. She and her husband Dimitroff were on the project in New York, and they did a great deal of work

MM:: What was that name you mentioned before Marion Greenwood's?

EG:: Rya Ludins, whose brother Eugene Ludins is a very fine painter, teaches at Iowa State or Iowa City.

MM:: That `s L-u -

EG:: L-u-d-l-n-s, and he has a cousin, I think, who was very active in painting in Marin, somewhere in Mill Valley or somewhere. I see her name constantly in the shows.

MM:: Do you think the work done then in New York during the project was more experimental than the work being done in San Francisco?

EG:: I think so. Very decidedly. That's what my mind may have been groping for.

MM:: Why do you think that was -- because there were better artists there?

EG:: No, I think it was the influences from Europe.

RM:: The European influences. Actually, the only influence they had out there, outside of Hiler, which wasn't

very great, unfortunately was Rivera. I think Hiler was advanced certainly to Diego Rivera's influence, but Diego Rivera, of course, was the main influence out here. That's definite.

EG:: Yes.

RM:: And for some reason or other, it never seemed to have coagulated and come together. Even his influence wasn't ever built up much, as you can see in Coit Tower and the other murals around town. It never did come up to any sort of standard close to his work at all.

EG:: Of course, New York was so exposed, you see, to the European influences, and there was a tremendous interest in abstract art, a tremendous interest influenced by Leger; from Miro; Chagall at that time; practically everybody: Picasso without any doubt whatsoever.

MM:: Shows of their work were being held in New York during that period?

EG:: Oh, yes, ever since the 1913 Armory Show. After all, people like Stuart Davis were tremendously influenced. Refregier himself.

MM:: Not very many of these European artists came to New York, though, in the thirties, did they? Wasn't it later during the war that they began to immigrate to the New York area? Of course, Hofmann, as you have mentioned, was already there.

EG:: Yes, he was conducting a private school.

MM:: What about the surrealist influence on the project in New York? Was there much of that? I'm thinking of men like Matta.

RM:: Well, he's quite young.

MM:: Oh, is he? He would be too young to have been known at that time?

EG:: I think so. I don't recall him.

RM::: The French surrealists would be the ones that had the influence.

EG:: I don't know whether a man like Pavel Tchelitchew was on the project. I doubt it.

MM:: I was interested because here in certain areas of the project in San Francisco, in the lithography group, for example, there was quite a surrealist development which didn't extend to the mural project. People were working in a kind of surrealism, a combination of that and magic realism. Rene Magritte, the Belgian painter, seemed to have had an influence -- and it's right on my tongue -- I can't remember, it's a very famous -- not Dali but the next most famous surrealist -- gone. But I was wondering if this occurred in New York too. Was there any influence of the surrealist work on project murals or on project paintings?

EG:: I imagine so. I can't specifically recall who, but it undoubtedly was so.

MM:: Did you know Reuben Kadish?

EG:: Yes, I knew Reuben Kadish.

MM:: He was on the project here in San Francisco. I was wondering if he had transferred to the project in New York.

RM:: No.

MM:: No? It was after that, wasn't it?

EG:: I don't remember. I'm not sure whether Jack Levine was on. I don't think Jack Levine was on the project, but certainly Kuniyoshi was.

MM:: What did he do, murals or easel painting?

EG:: No, he did easel painting. I think the muralists were people like Refregier, Philip Guston. Those are the only two I can think of at the moment. I'm sure that Bill de Kooning went into mural painting then.

RM:: Gorky? Of course, he's already been mentioned.

MM:: Is there much WPA work still around in the city of New York that you notice or that you see?

EG:: Oh, yes, I think in the post offices. Outlying -- in the state itself, we'll say, rather than in the city, and in various other states. People, you see, were assigned murals in post offices all over, and government buildings all over the country.

MM:: You mentioned the demonstrations, the sit-in demonstrations that the artists held in New York for higher pay. I was wondering if there was very much friction between the supervisors of the project and the people who actually worked on the project?

EG:: The immediate supervisors, no. Not of the various groups, the painting, the graphics and the sculpture, but there was a great deal of friction always with Brehon Somervell and the heads of the Federal Art Project itself in Washington.

MM:: Was it mainly over working conditions?

EG:: Yes, and also over the type of work that was being produced. I think they wanted more realistic and representational work, and I think there was a good deal of friction over the new abstractionists

MM:: I was going to ask you about that -- whether the artists felt confined by the directives of the project?

EG:: Yes, they did, but I think this was always in the larger assignments, never in the personal work that was being done by the people in their own studios for themselves because there was a great deal of freedom, you see. You could do as you chose. As a matter of fact, you were encouraged to make your own projects, as I did with Max Spivak before I was assigned to various things. I think at first the individual artists who worked in their own studios were assigned, but after that, they were free to do as they chose, and they were never molested. They were encouraged to develop on their own.

MM:: But the final work had to be approved?

EG:: The final work had to be approved.

MM:: Did you ever have any of your designs rejected?

EG:: Never.

MM:: Did any of the people that you knew, artists that you knew have their work rejected?

EG:: I can't recall.

MM:: So probably most of it was accepted?

EG:: Yes, there was a great deal of ill feeling about the fact that so many of the things that were done were stored in basements and lofts and so forth and never utilized.

MM:: What did happen to the work in New York? There have been all kinds of rumors that we've heard about some paper dealer buying up a great many old WPA paintings and discovering early de Kooning's and Kline's and making quite a bit of money.

EG:: I imagine that's very true because there was so much work produced, you see, and no place to put it so that it was stored. Then some enterprising person could go into these warehouses and get it. They were stored in warehouses, too.

RM:: That seemed to have been a big problem, the problem of distribution of the art itself. We interviewed Dorothy Collins, who was secretary to the head of the project here, and they sent her out with a station wagon full of things, you know, and she'd go from school to school throughout Northern California. That was quite a problem, just to sell them on the business of having the paintings hung in a school, or a mural or a decoration of any kind.

EG:: Yes, well, as a matter of fact, in the school for which I work, in the adult education project, there are a good many things that were done on the WPA, the Federal Art Project.

MM:: The school here in San Francisco?

EG:: Yes

MM:: What school is that?

EG:: This was originally the Marina Adult School. It's now called the Pacific Heights Adult School, and they have

things hanging right now in the offices, things that were done on the project. I just recall that now.

MM:: Do you remember any of the artists?

EG:: Some very handsome things, too.

MM:: Do you remember any of the artists by name?

EG:: No.

MM:: Do you think it might be a good idea for the government of the United States to sponsor the arts again?

EG:: Decidedly! Unequivocally!! Yes, indeed. I think it was a glorious period, a tremendous assistance to the artist not only from the point of view of his livelihood but in influencing him in his development.

MM:: If they did undertake such a project, would you have any suggestions for improvements? Ways that it might be run that would improve the situation from what it was in those days?

EG:: Well, it seemed to me such a remarkable thing then. I don't know what conditions would be now, you see. I couldn't, off-hand, suggest any improvements because it seemed to us such a marvelous way in which to freely produce, develop as an artist. I don't know what the local situation would be, how it would have to be improved, but what was outstanding was the freedom of the individual artist to experiment, to explore, to go on on his own and to contribute to the general art scene, the general development.

RM:: The qualifications to get on a Federal Art Project today would have to be much higher than they were at that time because that was actually a relief project.

EG:: A question of need, yes.

RM:: Now you'd have to make it quite difficult, quite steep.

MM:: Do you think there is a need among artists in the United States for this kind of sponsorship?

EG:: I do, very decidedly.

RM:: It would be interesting to interview some of the younger artists who weren't on the project at the time to find out what they really think about this. I haven't talked to any so I don't know.

MM:: No. It would be interesting.

RM:: In fact, I would say that at least eighty percent of the artists we've talked to feel that another project would be a good thing. Is that the proportion?

MM:: Yes. You mentioned earlier that the European influence on New York was so much stronger than it was in San Francisco. I was wondering whether there was much interest in Europe at that time in the government sponsorship of art in the United States? Did you ever hear anything about this?

EG:: Interest in the government--?

MM:: Interest in the government program for artists. I was wondering whether the Europeans were paying attention to what we were doing on the WPA here in the United States? Did you ever hear anything about this in New York?

EG:: No, I can't recall.

MM:: Because a great many countries in Europe, of course, have sponsored art in one way or the other for a long period of time and this was the only time in America that there had been this experiment with sponsorship.

EG:: Yes, I would say definitely that the artist felt this very strongly, and still feels this very strongly; even in Italy there is a government sponsored art project and that most certainly in a country like the United States there should be a government sponsored art project.

MM:: Of course, in England, too, I don't know if they sponsor the plastic arts, but they've had a long history of sponsorship of theater groups. Do you have any general comments about the WPA period?

EG:: As I say, it was a period of great happiness and vigor, vitality, enthusiasm, halcyon days, and they certainly should be continued.

MM:: Thank you very much for giving us the time for the interview. END OF INTERVIEW