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Oral history interview with Myron S. Stout,
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Transcript

Interview

[three tapes, transcribed by Christopher Busa, February 1, 1998]

RB: We are updating an interview done in 1965 [with Dorothy Seckler for the Archives of American Art]. You talked about World War II, your beginning studies with Hans Hofmann, living in New York, living summers here part of the time. Could you explain how you were attracted to Hofmann's teaching?

MS: Actually, I had been here the summer of '38, as I was just completing my graduate work. My painting teacher from Columbia Teacher's College, Charles Martin, had a class here and I came here and worked with him part of the summer in '38. Of course Hofmann was here at that time. I didn't know him. I knew of him, but I didn't know anything further about him except that friends of mine had studied with him. In 1946, after the war, I had leave from my teaching job in Hawaii, and came back to Columbia, thinking I might go on with further graduate work toward a doctorate.

RB: In art history?

MS: No, I was going back to Teacher's College, so it would have been in the teaching of fine art, which is what my master's degree had been in. My idea at that time was to make up a program which included all art. The old-fashioned term used to be art appreciation. This was to be an arts appreciation, with the intermingling and interrelationship of the various arts. I was quite interested in it, having been something of a musician at one time, and interested in literature. I had an old friend who was also in New York, during my second semester, January, '47. She was working with Hofmann at his school on 8th Street. She said, why don't you come down, because you can draw and work at the same time you are doing this other work, so I did. During the war, and the immediate pre-war years, I was a little discouraged, and I wasn't sure about -- I wasn't happy with my painting. I was thinking I might shift the ground from painting to teaching entirely.

RB: Had Martin been a very effective teacher?

MS: Yes, he'd been a good teacher, but for me, up to a point. I was teaching in a boarding school, and the problem of trying to teach and having so little time for it was discouraging. Then the war came along, I was in the service, and I was thinking I might give it up. This friend (Toni La Selle), and others, said you don't need to. So I did go down to Hofmann's and started drawing. As soon as I went back to work, drawing and working in his class, I knew that I was never going to get a doctorate, and this is what I should be doing. I worked some that spring and came back up here to Provincetown, and worked some in the summer. I still had the job in Hawaii, so I went back in the fall, came back the next summer, went back the next fall, then quit teaching in '49. I was going to the Hofmann school through those summers. I had the GI Bill. The summer of '49 I went to Europe and came back and went into Hofmann's class and worked there most of the winter.

RB: What made you decide art, rather than art education, would be your course?

MS: The whole atmosphere created in Hofmann's class was very stimulating. There were so many young GIs, who had worked some before, then been in the service, and now came back and were anxious. Great excitement developed, evidenced by the whole New York School, as they called it.

RB: Was Hofmann himself quite a captivating figure?

MS: He had a particular quality of projecting. Not only did he know what the art of painting was, but he had the capacity to project his meanings. His class was very crowded. His painting criticisms were held every Friday afternoon, and no work would go on. A lot of us would come to class and draw and might not even see him all week. On Friday afternoon we would bring the work in. He would go through with a critique of everybody's work, whoever brought it in. It was always very crowded. There would be not only all the people working with him, but everybody interested in what was going on in painting. Because what was going on, in his class, and the burgeoning Abstract Expressionist movement --

RB: were closely intertwined?

MS: Yes, very closely intertwined. There would be a crowd there. When he had the class here in the summer, there would be so many people who would want to come -- and he had room for only so many, for these Friday afternoon criticisms -- that he had people come and sign up, and he would take only so many in. [laughs] So it

was an exciting time for those of us who were working. Also it was exciting to many people who were just interested in it. At the criticisms, you might find Clement Greenberg, for instance, you might find Rosenberg, who later wrote for the New Yorker, and coined the phrase in an article of his, I understand, action painting.

RB: Hofmann was so articulate, he could talk to those of you who were working your way into the field, as well those who were observers of it?

MS: Yes. Now when you say articulate, there was a sense in which he wasn't articulate. His English wasn't very good. It's an old story -- everyone who was around him or attended the class knows it. In spite of his often German syntax with English words, and so on, he did, as I say, project his meaning anyway. So I guess you can call this a kind of articulateness. It was the combination of deep concern and what was already practically a lifetime of work and study, and teaching, at the same time, that he had this capacity. I think there are lots of people who are pretty good teachers, who are not necessarily good painters. He had the remarkable ability to be both the complete painter and the complete teacher. I worked with him, intermittently, from the summer of '46 to about 1952. I would be in and out, altogether not more than two years of study, I suppose.

RB: Your primary teacher was yourself, rather than Hofmann?

MS: No, I won't say that, because I learned a great deal from him. I came to him as a more mature artist than the young ones who were there. I suppose I was ready for what he had to say. He was very inspiring, as a person, and as an artist.

RB: What form did it take in affecting your work?

MS: It got me back to work, with a vengeance. I would work all morning, all afternoon, sometimes eight or nine hours a day. This was also true afterwards in the couple of winters I spent in New York, two or three winters, when I was going into the class, then staying at home and working. It was a very intense period, a re-awakening, so to speak, a vivid experience, very valuable. I wouldn't say it was just that I was learning. Everyone has to learn for themselves. That was one of the things I heard him say, and there was once a panel discussion at the Art Association here. I can't remember anybody else on it, except maybe Gottlieb. The subject was, can art be taught? Hans, when it came his turn, said, "The question is: can art be taught? I say no, it can't." Then he went on to indicate that you can leap, you can create the proper atmosphere, you can tell dogmatically, but it doesn't make any difference unless the person is up to it and can learn on his own. His class had a large number of these GI artists who ranged with such a wide variety of styles, from people like Larry Rivers, who had a very individualistic style, to ones working in a more constructivist, to ones working in a more naturalistic way. There were always various approaches going on, but it didn't matter to him what approach you took. There were certain things you had to be able to do through whatever approach you took, in order to make it become art.

RB: Were those things several things spelt out, or did it sort of sink in?

MS: He had a very explicit philosophy of what painting is, and the means for that. It wouldn't matter if he were talking about a reproduction of a Picasso or a Piero della Francesca -- the same thing applied, whether it was a completely abstract Kandinsky or a Giotto.

RB: He would make the same points?

MS: Yes.

RB: And would those usually be what?

MS: At bottom, the painter's problem is the business of the flat surface, two dimensions, and you have to imply three dimensions. You don't make three dimensions. You have to adapt, you have to allude, to the third dimension. You do it through various dynamic means, from variations in color to overlapping planes. It applies in Japanese or Chinese art, or 14th century art, or 20th century art.

RB: He was able to get that point across?

MS: Yes, it was a particular point with him. Around the studio, in the early '50s, late '40s, Life magazine was just picking up on art -- they, by the way, did a long article on Hofmann himself. But they would do an article on the Sistine Chapel, for instance, or on the Arena Chapel at Padua, of Giotto's. There were reproductions, and they didn't do a bad job for a mass magazine. Anything that caught his eye went up on the studio wall. It might be a postcard of an Egyptian stature or a Picasso or a Matisse, or whatnot, many different things. He created an atmosphere of the universality of art.

RB: These are years in which you spent most of your time in your own painting and discovery?

MS: Yes, I was working very hard. I drew from the model very regularly, something he insisted on. The value --

not to lose a direct visual experience. You can do anything with the figure. You can paint it very naturalistically, or you can do it more expressionistically, or you can go on to complete abstraction, but that business of having the true visual experience of nature is essential. It is what feeds you. It's what you see. You can't fake anything that you don't have in you. You can't just make up. Your imagination seizes on these things, and can go on from there.

RB: So it may emerge completely transformed from nature?

MS: Yes, completely transformed, but it must have its base and force in nature. It's an item that has been, I think, somewhat lost in teaching today, from the work of young painters that I see. The paintings look empty. You see a succession of them, then there is a lack of the real experience underneath, and behind, what they're doing. Of course, there are others who do have it.

RB: For you, it was an essential trigger, wasn't it?

MS: It was. From the very beginning, even as an undergraduate, I was working both -- my teachers then were concerned both with contemporary, what was going on in the '20s, and into the '30s, and traditional art, also. During all of those years I worked both directly from nature in the naturalistic way, and abstractly. At first I worked more figuratively -- I should say more landscapely, because landscape was something I had a particular feeling for.

RB: Was it to analyze that landscape, or to record it in great detail?

MS: No. As with anything else, it is what happens with light, in space, reacting with what's there. [laughs] That seems rather an abstract way to put it, maybe, but you can't be specific.

RB: You were laying down what you were seeing?

MS: It's always selective. You can't paint every last thing there.

RB: By the late '40s, early '50s, you were going entirely in the direction of abstraction?

MS: When I first went down to draw with Hans, I started working entirely abstractly, and I continued to do so, and paint, entirely abstractly, until '52, '53, '54, somewhere in there. It was when I left New York and came up here to live, I was so much more close to nature, regularly. I began to draw nature from nature. If I showed Hans a landscape drawing, he'd say, "Oh, you stay over nature." I thought this a very good way to put it. In other words, you control the nature of what you need for what you are putting on the paper.

RB: Were these drawings ancillary for you?

MS: I was working geometrically, more or less -- when I say geometrically I mean more or less abstractly. After I came up here and began to draw naturalistically, I had a spell of painting much more freely and expressionistically than I had out of the cubist or neo-plastic, or whatnot, inspiration. It didn't last very long, but it quite a profound effect. Shortly afterward, when I began to use a shape within a field, and that developed through charcoal studies and oil paintings, and into graphites, which I got into later on, this working directly from nature had a big influence to swing me away from a more geometrical -- it was still completely abstract, but less geometrical, on the whole.

RB: There was a response to the organic.

MS: Yes, what do people say -- biomorphic. There was a biomorphic feeling, even though they weren't necessarily biomorphic shapes. The study of nature brought me back to what was still very deep within me, and which was a very necessary part of me, being back here, being in the landscape, and walking constantly over the dunes and the woods. Of course I had grown up in a small town where the countryside was always prevalent. I had a pony and was out riding around.

RB: You were so much consumed with work in the 40s and 50s. In New York, before Provincetown, you were a member of the Club?

MS: I was not an early member, immediately, when it was formed. A group of artists, Motherwell and de Kooning and all, began to have a series of seminars -- I forget what they called it. I rather think it must have been as early as '49, '50. I used to go to those occasionally. After that, I think the Club was formed. It was about the time I came up here, so I wasn't on the scene. In those days I went back and would stay anywhere from two or three weeks, or a month, even six weeks in the city, in the winter. When I would go down, I went to the Club with some friend or another, then I was put up for membership and became a member. But even so, I didn't go with the regularity that all those New York artists went. There were lots of interesting people at the Club. There was frequently a discussion of some kind, with a panel, and people spoke from the floor. It could be very interesting,

but a lot of times I thought it was very dull. But it was a center for the whole New York School, and played a very important part in what was going on. I got to know a great many more of the artists that way than I would have otherwise. I gradually stopped going -- it got less interesting and it was sort of dying.

RB: Do you suppose it even in part got started as a way for artists to congregate, to casually meet each other?

MS: Yes. Philip Pavia, the sculptor, I just remembered he was the secretary or president and he was the guy behind it who kept organized, kept it going. You had to pay fees, rent had to be paid.

RB: It was a kind of elaborate thing for up and coming artists to have a formal structure?

MS: Yes, but it was pretty damn informal. You have to remember you could rent a sizeable loft for \$50 or \$60 a month, in those days. I don't know how many members they had, maybe 200. It was as social as it was artistic and intellectual. There were parties some nights even when there was no kind of special program--no one to talk, no panel or program. It was a very important thing as a focal point for the New York School, even without a formal program, because you would find people talking about their art and what it was and what it wasn't, how terrible so and so was, and how good so and so was.

RB: Did you need such contacts yourself?

MS: I found it stimulating. But it didn't stimulate me enough so that even when I was in the city I would necessarily always go.

RB: You were rather an exception, to come up here and stay so long, and eventually throughout the year?

MS: Yes, I don't know anybody else who did that, unless it was because they went off to teach somewhere, or something of that kind. Everybody in those days wanted to be right there in New York, and they wanted to be right here in Provincetown in the summer, most of them. In the early '50s some artists began to go to East Hampton, and the New York artists were split between the two. Woodstock had been the old place, and way back still earlier people went to Gloucester and various art colonies. Provincetown ceased to be the kind of art center in the summer that it was during the '50s, and has never become such again, thank God!

RB: It was too much?

MS: Yes, it was too much. When the artists were here, of course the galleries came, and the more galleries there were the more shows there were. There would be two or three opening nights a week, and two or three openings each one of those nights. Because you knew everybody you felt you had to go, and it got to be too much. At one point I just announced, "I'm not going to anybody's opening, I don't care who they are." I would see the show, but not go to the opening. It got around and so my friends didn't get mad if I didn't come.

RB: Who were some of your artist friends in those days?

MS: At first they were the people I knew at Hofmann's class -- I'm bad at names. Jan Muller, Goodnough, I can't remember. It's on record. All were acquaintances of mine and some were friends. Jan was a great friend, and Alan Kaprow, George Segal, Robert Frank, the photographer, and his wife Mary Frank, a sculptor. Miles Forst and Barbara, who were then married. Nearly all were younger than I was. I preferred their company. By that time I was in my 40s, in the '50s.

RB: Did you spend much of your time talking about art or what you were trying to do?

MS: I don't think there was a great deal of talk about art. On the other hand, after I came up here, in the wintertime there was no one here, and I met Karl Knaths, and Jim Forsberg moved up here about that time, with his wife and family, and Campbell, the sculptor. We formed a little circle, we got together, and we did talk about art. Karl had translated Einstein, the European critic. He had written a book in French which had been translated into German, and Karl knew the German. He wanted to translate it into English, but he didn't have a really good command of English, so we would get together with his translation and try to turn it into good English. It was very excellent criticism, one of the first books written on the Cubists. It was written back in 1914, something like that.

RB: These were rather intense evenings then?

MS: They were. As a variation, I'd gotten very interested in Greek drama. I got myself the O'Neill complete plays, comedies and tragedies. The Forsbergs and Karl and I would get together. We would read one of the Sophocles, or another, with each of us taking certain parts. Of course there was absolutely nothing going on in the winter in those days. We needed each other in order to keep from catching cabin fever. We would read these, or work on the translation, or talk about it. Karl loved to talk about art. He'd want us to come into his studio and talk to him about he was doing, and tell him what we thought of them, and he would come into our

studios and we would talk.

RB: He was an outgoing sort?

MS: Very outgoing sort. A really wonderful person. In a way he was a little lonely. His wife, Helen, was not well, and of a reclusive nature. Karl was perfectly willing to spend long hours by himself. He took long walks, off in the dunes, and worked hours in his studio, but he also liked to have these gettings together. He enjoyed them immensely, and we enjoyed them.

RB: Knaths didn't have much New York connection, did he?

MS: He'd always been rather reclusive. At one point, he had gone down to Washington and taught a class at the Phillips Gallery. He and Helen would make a trip to Washington or New York, until she got too ill to go. He stayed here, but he had Rosenberg as a dealer, so he was showing regularly. I remember back in the early '50s there was a big American show at the Metropolitan. This was back in the '40s, I think, just after the war, and Karl won one of the prizes in that show. I had known his work in my undergraduate art classes. He was one of the American artists, along with Stuart Davis and people who were more or less abstract, who were popular and considered both American and avant garde in those days. Now his work looks anything but avant garde, but it did in the early 1930s.

RB: It did certainly compared with most American work. By the '50s what was your feeling about Karl's work?

MS: I didn't care for the way he used lines. There was a linear quality he gave to his work. It was a strange sort of thing. Let's say Jim Forsberg and I were in his studio, and he would have laid out a canvas, and it would just be a laying-out of some color planes. It'd be very beautiful. Then he'd start working in on these color planes with suggestions of figures. He had a series called The Clam Digger, and others. Earlier on -- he showed us some older pictures which were completely abstract, and which I thought somewhat better. Only toward the end of his life he began to use less of the black lines. I felt the paintings became much more open and stronger. He wouldn't take offense, I told him what I thought, because he wanted to know.

RB: But he kept on hoeing his row.

MS: He kept on hoeing his row -- I think by that time he was too old to change easily, but he was anxious to know what we thought because he felt we were in the middle of whatever was going on then, and he felt like he had been out of it. So I think we did have some effect, but not that much.

RB: Knaths was the principle older artist you would see when you were living here in the winters? The principle chum?

MS: Yes, he and Campbell. In the summer, it was another matter, because all of my friends from New York were up here, at least part of the summer, and a good many for all summer. You could come here comparatively cheaply in those days. You could rent a place for the summer that you could live in and work in for \$200 or \$300. We tended to be in and out of each others studios, but not a great deal of a talk about art, as I remember, mostly a social life, of which we had a great deal. The summers were very lively. We had great times.

RB: Did Walter Chrysler's opening of a museum in the old church have much of an effect?

MS: It had a great deal of an effect, and a lot of us thought it was a deleterious one.

RB: About 1954, I think.

MS: Yes, '54 or '55, I can't remember.

RB: Deleterious effect, you say.

MS: Immediately more people came and wanted to open galleries, and did open galleries, 'cause they thought they could sell things, and some of them did. Chrysler began buying locally, from the artists who came here. It became a kind of mad scramble, and the ease and informality and peace and quiet and getting together, evenings, and getting together and having a mask dance, or that sort of thing, was not so easy anymore. All these galleries were opening. I couldn't walk from here to Commercial Street, and downtown, or the other way, to a gallery without spending half an hour doing it, because I had to stop and talk to so many people. I remember going to New York on Memorial Day, which was and still is a very big holiday here, and going back to the city -- of course the city is very quiet on Memorial Day -- and I thought how wonderful just to be here and be anonymous. I can wander around and I don't have to speak to anybody.

RB: This developed a sort of pressure by then.

MS: Yes. You asked about another group here. There was this gallery here in Provincetown, a group got together and formed a cooperative gallery at 256 Commercial, which was under a movie theater, it was the basement of a movie theater, by Town Hall. We operated for a year or two, I forget. I think it must have been the summer of 1954.

RB: Was that perhaps an attempt by artists to run their own affairs?

MS: Yes, and then there weren't that many galleries. It was only after Chrysler came -- he had a great big show, in tents, an enormous show, nationwide, that he first started with here. We didn't know he was going to do this when we made our plans the summer before. But there were not that many galleries.

RB: Were there collectors coming through?

MS: There were collectors that came here, and with the advent of Chrysler I think many more collectors came. So there was a benefit in that more artists sold more paintings from that time until '61 or '62 than ever had happened before. But like I say, as a place to live and work, it became less pleasant. We formed this group, and broke up at the end of that year because most of us found a gallery to show in. I showed at the HCE Gallery which Nat Halper had opened. He had built the gallery for Sam Kootz, and Sam operated it, and he worked with Sam there, but he gave up after a year. He decided he couldn't make any big money here. He couldn't find enough big time collectors. He closed it. And Nat went on, and he operated next with Jack Cuddihy.

RB: Was Nat more patient? More inclined to take an interest in the artists than Sam Kootz?

MS: He was, but he was not that familiar with art. He had more to do with writing. Then Nat began to run the gallery himself, and I showed off and on with him there, the only gallery I ever regularly showed with here in Provincetown. In the meantime, this group of friends, including Kaprow and Segal and Muller and Richard Stankiewicz, and several others that I came up here with in the early '50s, formed a cooperative gallery down in New York on 12th Street and Broadway, just as all the 10th Street galleries were forming, nearby. They asked me to show. In 1954 I had my first one-man show at the Stable Gallery in New York, and they asked me then to come and join them, so I did. I went from the Stable to the Hansa Gallery. They had been operating a couple years.

RB: How did you happen to go with the Stable Gallery? Had you gotten to know Eleanor Ward?

MS: I began to peddle pictures around. Oddly enough, I had two chances to have a show. One was at -- a gallery of Illus--he had a second gallery-- I can't remember the name -- and this gallery and Eleanor both offered me shows--the seasons of '53 and '54. I had the show at the Stable in '54, then in '55 I went to Hansa, and stayed until -- we closed it, by that time most of the people were going to other galleries because they had made reputations.

RB: But at the time there was some virtue in getting known with low overhead?

MS: We became so, yes. We moved from 12th Street, in '54, up to Central Park South, just around the corner from the Stable, just off Seventh Avenue. We had the first floor of a brownstone, and didn't pay awfully high rent. Some of us even made money at it. We were near the Stable and not far from other 57th Street galleries. It was close enough to be on the rounds of people, and collectors. Bob Skull's interest in some of us happen there. He, and people like him, began to include the Stable in his rounds.

RB: Was Eleanor Ward an effective promoter?

MS: She didn't promote anything for me. She never sold a single thing. She died not long ago. I think she had cancer. I'd seen her in 1980 when I was in town and had quite a pleasant visit. I don't know why she didn't find that much interest in my work. She took it and she kept it and she kept it for a year. I was on her roster, but as far as I know she never made any effort to sell. Nick Carrone was an advisor.

RB: When you went to the Hansa, did you find they were better at promoting your work?

MS: We promoted ourselves. We had a director. We took out ads. I was up here most of the time. Then, not the first year, but the next year, Bellamy joined, came in as director of the gallery, '55 and '56. Somewhere along '58 Ivan Karp came in with him, as a kind of assistant -- I think Dick didn't believe in having an assistant and said we're going to work together, we'll just be co-directors, which was typical of Dick.

RB: What was Bellamy's background?

MS: He was just a friend of those who had started the gallery. I don't know what else he had done. He had done some radio announcing, and he was aspiring to write, a poet of some kind, but he turned out to be one of the most remarkable gallery directors in the country, just through interest. He had a very good eye. He came in, he

was handed his people, because we were the ones who had the gallery. Then in '60 when we closed the gallery, he got some backing and opened the Greene Gallery. His opening show was Mark Di Suvero, who had never shown uptown. He showed Segal, he showed Rosenquist first. He had great success.

RB: Bellamy has a remarkable eye.

MS: He has a very good eye, yes, and he's a very good person to work with. He's a very considerate person. He's concerned with you personally, besides the business relationship. Most gallery people try to do this, but most don't succeed, according to some experience I've had and a great deal that I hear.

RB: Did your things do well at the Hansa?

MS: No, I didn't do terribly well at the Hansa. I sold some.

RB: Were you at the Sun Gallery up here in Provincetown then?

MS: No, I didn't show at the Sun. The Sun Gallery was formed to show artists who had not shown. It was very young artists, and by that time I was already showing at Gallery 256 or at HCE. But the Sun Gallery was very active, and introduced Red Grooms for one. Jan Muller had a show there. Tony Vevers had a show. It was a remarkable and lively gallery. A young woman named Yvonne Anderson ran it, together with her husband. She was something of an artist, and he was a poet. He washed dishes or was a busboy out at the Moors, I think, so they could pay the rent on the gallery they ran. It was a concern about doing something that seemed real and valuable to them. Yvonne has since gotten into film and done some remarkable things with films.

RB: In the '50s there was a real dynamism here?

MS: Yes, very lively.

RB: So many young from New York came here to try to show?

MS: Yes. They came here to show, to work, and there got to be places like the Sun Gallery, a lot of galleries, I can't remember how many we counted at one time. The young people came. I had come when it wasn't that lively, and while I enjoyed having all my friends come and be here in the summer, I was happy when it declined some, and I could become a little more anonymous again.

RB: Did your work do on at its own pace despite the socializing and such? In the mid-'50s you began doing your black and white work, mostly in the winter.

MS: Yes, but the strange thing is that I worked very hard in the summers, too. While I worked hard in the winters, I nearly always took some time off and was out of town. I'd have a long fall, after it got peaceful and quiet, which it used to do right after Labor Day. Now it goes on until November. It used to get very quiet after Labor Day and I'd have a long peaceful time. I had and still have family in Texas, and I used to go down there, and New York on the way and sometimes New York on the way back, and that could stretch out to be six weeks.

RB: Did you work when you were away?

MS: In New York, it was a catching up on things, and visiting my friends there, because not all of them came up here. For instance, Richard Stankiewicz never came up here. He's the only artist of that old group who never came up here at all.

RB: What was he like?

MS: A very nice and very interesting fellow, marvelous craftsman, and very good sculptor. In those days you never sold enough to do your living, so you always had to do something else. He was a mechanical draftsman in machine parts. He was very good at it. He did that freelance, and apparently he made a good living because he always had a nice loft, always fixed it up, with wonderful shelves and had everything just right. A good cook. We would go have dinner with him and Jean Follett, who was doing not sculpture, more relief work, and has never become very well known, but was doing very interesting work.

RB: She was quite involved with the Hansa.

MS: Yes, she was a member of the Hansa. She showed regularly with the Hansa. Afterward she went back to St. Paul where she had come from. To my knowledge she has never come back to New York to work. Occasionally Bellamy has shown a piece of hers, because he always took great interest in her. I'm still in contact with her. She always calls when she's anyway near. We write occasionally.

RB: What was Jan Muller like?

MS: Jan was along in his 20s when I first knew him. He had come to this country. He was German by birth and was caught as a young man, 16 or 17, by occupation forces in France and put in a labor camp down in southern France, and didn't get over here till the end of the war. Unfortunately while he was there he had that disease that gives you heart trouble --

RB: Rheumatic fever.

MS: Yes, while he was in the camp, and of course they had no treatment. He had a very brief life after that. He came and was working with Hans. A German intellectual romanticist, you might describe him. He came over here with his love of Goethe, and his German literary background, as well as art. In his early days he was painting abstractly, then gradually began to introduce the figure. This became a very unique and individual expressionism. His painting life was not that long, from the late '40s until he died in 1957, I believe.

RB: Did he introduce directly European things to you?

MS: He was someone I would talk with. We had similar interests, intellectually, which included existentialist literature and philosophy, which were very strong in those days. And the business of expressionism against other modes of painting. We used to talk about art more than I usually did with my other friends.

RB: Well you were ready more at that time?

MS: Yes.

RB: Wolf Kahn was another friend of this period?

MS: Yes, Wolf and Peter, his brother. Wolf was quite young when I first met him, just out of college, studying with Hans and working quite abstractly in those days. Later went to a naturalistic style of painting. His wife, Emily Mason, was the daughter of Alice Trumbull Mason. We had given her -- I think she was an American Abstract Artist -- and didn't show much, wasn't active. We gave her a show at the Hansa. I liked her work very much. I sort of lost track of her work and don't know what it is like now. I have not kept up with Peter Kahn's work. I don't know how much he has done. I know he raised a family. He had something like six or eight daughters. The last time I saw him I know there were six or seven--they were a wonderful collection of little girls. Then he'd have everyone over for dinner. He had a big place up the street. The little girls would be helping with the meal.

RB: Another friendship you had in the '50s was with Alfred Leslie.

MS: Alfred I knew more in New York. He was up here, but not that much. I think he was in a class up here in the summer before I went to New York. Mike Goldberg, Grace Hartigan. I don't think Grace studied with Hans, but she was a very good model. Joan Mitchell was at the class and she also came up here. Helen Frankenthaler -- I don't remember her coming to Hans' classes, but she was here in the summer, in the '40s, and of course later when she and Motherwell were married.

RB: Was Frankenthaler a very promising person when you first knew her?

MS: All I knew was that she was an attractive gal who always had lots of boyfriends. I just remember seeing her at parties and I don't remember her painting at all, until later on, when she began showing in New York. When I first knew her she was fresh out of Bennington. Alfred's work is still what I consider very serious. Then you take Muller who started out very abstractly. But he became expressionistic, he didn't become naturalistic. It's strange, during that brief period of Jan's painting life, the Guggenheim, four years after his death, made a retrospective. It was a big show and a very good one. Messer took a particular interest.

RB: Strange because his career was so short.

MS: And had a profound effect on young painters -- Bob Thompson was largely inspired by him. There were others that turned to an expressionistic way out from abstraction. The whole Abstract Expressionist movement was made up of a very polyglot group, a lot of whom weren't painting abstract expressionistically at all.

RB: But they briefly converged.

MS: They respected each other. But there were some who felt people who painted, let's say, a la Mondrian, like Bolotowsky, weren't any good, that they were off on the wrong track. Others said it depended on what you do with it. Tape 2; March 26, 1964:

RB: Did you know Betty Parsons?

MS: We were not friends, we were just acquaintances. I knew her in the gallery, and occasionally socially. She

was someone for whom I had the greatest respect as a gallery dealer because she didn't deal in anything that she didn't believe in. She was very loyal. Of course she was in a position, financially, to do this. She was a top dealer, because she had a really good eye, and dealt well with her artists. Rose Fried had very little money, yet she maintained a gallery in New York for many years, and would have continued if she hadn't become ill and died. She was perhaps even more meticulous about the people she showed than Betty was. She was more dedicated to the neo-plastic, constructivist area, had very beautiful shows. The only time I saw a really beautiful show of say, Picabia, for instance, was at Rose Fried's gallery. Once when I was there and she came out and greeted me and said, "Myron, I want you to know Marcel Duchamp. Marcel Duchamp, this is Myron Stout." I was so overwhelmed with meeting the great man, that I looked at him and my jaw dropped, and I told him I had been an admirer of his for such a long, long time. And he said, "Oh, don't make it so long." [laughter] SO we went on and chatted and he was a delightful person. It was the only time I had a chance to meet him.

RB: She was one you knew.

MS: I knew most of the people who were running the avant-garde galleries in those days. I knew her, I knew Betty, I knew Charlie Egan -- not well. Martha Jackson, Bertha Schaeffer. [laughs]

RB: Why do you laugh?

MS: I don't know, except that Bertha came up here one summer and we were all at dinner at Vivian DiPenno's. Bertha had a way, particularly after dinner, of dropping off to sleep. We had this very good dinner that Vivian had put out, and the party broke up. There was a sofa and some chairs in the dining room, and others in the living room. Some went into the living room and some stayed in the dining room. I was sitting next to Bertha on the sofa. The talk went on, and I noticed her nodding and nodding, so I would clear my throat or manage to move. Finally I realized she was just going to go to sleep no matter what. She was nodding, she was asleep, and turned to me and said, "If anything interesting happens, wake me up." I always think of that when I think of Bertha, and I guess that's why I was laughing. Sam Kootz I knew very well, because he was a Hofmann dealer.

RB: What was he like?

MS: Well, he was a North Carolinian, you know, a Southerner. He could be very charming and smooth. But I don't think he was easy to deal with. I always had a very pleasant relationship with him, and his first wife. After he closed his gallery I didn't see him anymore. He closed his gallery immediately after Hans Hofmann died. And I think Hans' death had a lot to do with him closing the gallery

RB: Nat Halper was with Kootz for a time, wasn't he?

MS: No, it was simply that Kootz wanted to open a gallery here, after the Chrysler Museum got going here. Kootz wanted to open a gallery, and he made a deal with Nat and Marjorie to build a gallery in front of their house, which really faced the water, rather than the street. The gallery would be right on the street. So they built it -- I don't know what their arrangement was, but it was the Kootz Gallery. After a year, Sam gave it up, because he got discouraged, and it became Nat's gallery and he called it HCE.

RB: By the mid-'50s you were moving away from color to black and white?

MS: Not quite like that. By 1951 I was doing charcoal drawings which were sharp black and white compositions, at the same time I was painting in color. As early as 1949 I tried painting in black and white, and it didn't work for me. So I gave it up and kept the charcoals going in black and white. In the first year or two that I stayed up here through the winter, I did two rather large black and white paintings. I was not happy enough with them ever to show them, but they were the first. By 1954 I did a black and white painting, then through the winter of '54-5, from then on I continued with black and white. I also was continuing some color paintings, but none of those ever came off, so everything I've ever shown since the fall of '54 has been black and white.

RB: By limiting yourself, do you find you are able to concentrate the impact?

MS: I never found the end of it. Even when I found a full expression through black and white, I still wasn't through with color, and I kept on working some with color. But the black & white so engaged me, I kept working with it, and I never did get back to color. I never got to the end of exploring black and white.

RB: By the late '50s you went into graphite, which enlarged your options.

MS: I wouldn't say "enlarged," because they were very small. [laughs] I began doing thumbnail black and whites, small sketches. This was after I came to do figure field things. Sometimes they were just line drawings, exploring what I wanted to do in painting. Some did develop into paintings. I did begin to do some graphite black and whites in the late '50s and early '60s, when they began to develop more completely. Instead of merely being sketches, they became quite resolved. That continued until I was no longer able to paint.

RB: And these drawings were all abstract, right?

MS: Yes, they were all abstract. Most of the nature drawings I made were made in the first two years, after I moved up here. I still did some as late as the early '60s, but they were not always in graphite pencil. They were usually in conte pencil.

RB: So you had a bit of a color element?

MS: Well, sometimes I used brown or sanguine, but most usually the black. There were one or two in which I would mix the black and sanguine.

RB: This mix was still essentially a monochrome, a refining, working in fewer media, limiting your color?

MS: If I were working in sanguine and I felt it needed something stronger, I may add some black here and there, but I don't think there were more than one or two drawings of that kind. Most always I did the drawings with a single pencil.

RB: Somewhere in the '50s you began giving titles to your work, whereas before they were simply a series or numbers, and it seemed you drew upon Greek mythology for the titles. Did that go back to your re-reading at that time of the Greek classics?

MS: I suppose so. The multi-colored paintings I had been doing, I didn't have any feeling for a name to call them, and they got catalogue numbers, the third one I did in 1952 or whatnot. After I got into the shapes, working with black and white, I began to discover either as I painted, or more likely afterwards, somewhere toward the end of the process, that there was some kind of mythological reference for them. The Greek mythology, which hadn't just started with my re-reading of the Greek dramas, but actually went back to my childhood. The first book I learned to read, before I went to school, was a book of Greek myths. I suppose that has some kind of a title. But the shapes, I began to realize, took on meaning in terms of mythology for me. I wouldn't hold that was an inviolable name for me. For instance, there was a black and white painting that got to be named "Leto I." A couple came to my studio on the recommendation of Karl Knaths, and they knew nothing about abstract painting at all. They came into my studio and they finally said, "Look, you'll have to tell us something about this because we don't understand abstract painting." So I tried to do what I could, explaining you had to simply respond with your feeling, rather than with your mind. I had this painting up, the one I later called "Leto II," and the man said, "Oh, I see, I would call that 'The Good News.'" And I said, what do you mean. He said, "It looks like the chauffeur." I asked him what he meant, because I wasn't familiar with it in Jewish theology, and he said it's the horn that is blown as the good news for -- I forget which holiday. I thought that was wonderful -- if he found his own mythological meaning. But for myself I stayed with the Greek mythology that I knew very well.

RB: The forms suggest the myth.

MS: Yes, like the drawings called Tereisias. There's all the element of an eyeless form. And the painting Aegis is a kind of shield form, and of course Zeus's Aegis was his butler. The titles weren't preconceived. I always found them afterwards. It helped clarify things for me, and if they were clear to me-- if people approached them intellectually, they may be confused, but if they approached them by feeling, they would find their own thing for it. But I did feel, if I did find a name, it had to have some metaphoric quality, just as an image is a metaphor.

RB: You try to allude, you can't simply duplicate.

MS: Or be explicit.

RB: In the '60s and '70s you have fairly few exhibitions?

MS: No, I was in more.

RB: Was there one in Boston at the ICA?

MS: That was at the end of the '50s, a show organized by Tom Messer, at the then Contemporary Institute. After Bellamy opened Greene Gallery, I began to be in various shows. I was at the Jewish Museum, I was at the Albright-Knox. My work was being shown more, though I wasn't having shows, if that's what you mean, but through my dealer I was being shown. I was in the Whitney off and on through the '60s and '70s, and in the Modern. After the Modern bought a painting, and showed it as a new accession, it was part of the main exhibition for a long time, before they rehung the gallery. Then, traveling shows, that moved around the country.

RB: You were getting more feedback at this time?

MS: Yes.

RB: Did people find your things difficult?

MS: I don't know what happened around the country, but in New York, I generally got a satisfactory mention. In group shows, in reviews of group shows, they can't mention everybody, you know, but I was frequently picked out and mentioned. So in a way there was public recognition of sorts.

RB: Were people already then talking about how careful and slow you were working, in contrast to the Abstract Expressionist throwing things together with considerable speed? Did that seem to bother some people? You must have contrasted.

MS: Oh, yes. They loved to make something out of it, the journalistic writers. Somebody reviewed the Washington Biennial and made a special point about how I spent so long. This particular critic put me down and said, "no matter how hard he worked on it, it was not worth it," or something of that kind. It seemed stupid to me that someone would pick out how long or how short you worked. You work to achieve what you need to achieve, to come to your solution. I've done some things in comparatively short times, even though mostly I haven't.

RB: So it's not a fault? It is a superficial issue.

MS: I don't think it makes any difference. The same thing has to do with size. I never painted large. I never felt at home with a canvas I couldn't pick up easily and put on the easel, and handle. I'm quite sure I never painted anything larger than 32 by 40, at the very largest. Some of the graphites are only two by three inches. On the other hand there are larger graphite too.

RB: You wanted to zero in and focus, or was it the medium you were using?

MS: I've known people who have used graphite on a very large scale, and do it quite successfully. But for me, the response of the graphite to the grain of the paper, has a great deal to do with what I can do with it. The size, and working with the pencil, you want something you can sit down and have in your lap, perhaps, or a lap board. I never did anything with a pencil that wasn't quite small. Otherwise it would take charcoal or something that flowed easily and freely.

RB: You wanted something more difficult, more demanding?

MS: I found the graphite, with the texture of the paper, challenging. Your medium is always a challenge. The form has to come through it, your expression has to. It's doesn't matter if it is small or larger.

RB: It has to ripen, you said before, evolve in your hands?

MS: In the matter of time, yes. Often things had been put away for long periods of time, or worked on with great intensity, then put away, left alone, then taken out, even over a period of years.

RB: When you had your exhibition at the Whitney in 1980, did they, or you, attempt to run down things you hadn't seen in a long time?

MS: I haven't done that many things! But yes, there were things I hadn't seen for quite some time. When your production is not large, and you work as intently and as long as I do, you know most of the details, you can recall them, whether you've seen them for a while or not. Even so, a few things surprised me when I hadn't seen them for a while.

RB: Were there some things in that show that surprised you?

MS: You have to realize that show came when I was losing vision. I was still able to work, and I worked up to it and afterwards, with an assistant. But it came as a kind of cap, a climax for me. It was a great help emotionally and psychologically in dealing with not being able to work anymore. At least I had a chance to see many of the things I had in the show. It was the largest show I'd ever had. It was a great pleasure to see all the friends I hadn't seen in a long time. It was even a greater satisfaction to see the work and have it seen as a kind of climax of some sort.

RB: To old friends that hadn't seen your work in a while, Stankiewicz, Eleanor Ward, were there lots of surprises for them?

MS: Many had not seen the more recent work. The longer I worked the more graphites I did, so people who had gotten used to my work from my 1957 show would not have seen many of these, nor many of the charcoals, also.

RB: Do you feel that staying in Provincetown, in the long run, has been a good thing for you? It's allowed you

time to work on your own, except you talked, earlier, about the '50s when the crowds began coming in.

MS: By and large I think it has worked for me.

RB: Provincetown, you said, began tapering off in the early '60s anyway, in terms of the intense rounds of the summer.

MS: Yes, it got more comfortable. The early '60s -- it's not that there weren't a lot of artists here, because that was the time, as we were talking beforehand, the A-House was the meeting place at night. Most of the artists -- we'd all be down there, start at one table and another table would be drawn up and pretty soon we'd have this great table with practically everybody we knew there that night. There was plenty of social life, but it was not as strenuous as that round of gallery going and openings. The dancing was fun.

RB: You've been involved with the Fine Arts Workshop.

MS: Yes, the Fine Arts Work Center. Started in 1968. Two or three who started it were artists and others were just people who were interested. Hudson Walker was probably was the chief member of the group. They wanted to help bring young artists back to Provincetown, to be here and work here, because it is such a satisfactory place to work. They made a trial session of two months in which they gave eight or ten fellowships, as we later called them. Motherwell came in and made a talk. The first full session was in the fall of '68, and that's when I came in. I wasn't in on the first little trial session, but I've been connected ever since the fall of '68.

RB: You would do critiques?

MS: The younger artists, who were out of school, and on their own, but who had not got into the professional world yet, with recognition, was to give them a chance to have a time to work, with some of their peers, and yet have access to older, established artists who were on hand and would come and talk with them. But it was to be absolutely non-academic. It was up to them whether we came in to see their work or not.

RB: Did the results justify your expectations?

MS: Yes, they have. I am still very supportive of it. I've had to withdraw from much action in it, since I can't work with the painters anymore, but I'm still on the board and supportive. It's a very good thing. The feedback we kept getting from those here six or eight or ten years ago is so good, that I feel happy about that.

MS: Since the late '40s early '50s, I had been working with sharp black and white charcoal drawings. Even in '49, I remember trying to make a black and white painting, and didn't succeed at all. It wasn't until I had come up here for the winter in '51 or '52, the first winter I was here, I began to get into the black and white paintings, and I did a couple. I wasn't as satisfied with the resolution of what I wanted to say in them. I may have mentioned this earlier. It wasn't until the summer of '54 that I went back to black and white. I was living at Days Lumberyard, in studio number 6. I had been painting in various colors and I did a very atypical painting, which was in three or four colors, mostly red and black and green. Then I painted a small black and white painting. I moved up to 11 Brewster, just up the street from me here now, and painted throughout the winter and through the next fall. That winter is when the black and white paintings came. They came so fast I couldn't paint them. I got enough started to last me for three or four years.

RB: What triggered this that suddenly made them work as paintings?

MS: I don't know. I found out how to make the two colors enough, so I could make a complete statement with them. In the charcoals I had begun to do, let's say shapes, instead of more geometric forms. They became less neo-plastic, which they never were really. But they were black shapes in a field. Having worked out how they were expressive for me, I began to paint a shape. The multi-colored paintings I'd been doing in an exploratory way for two years I spent here had been curvilinear.

RB: Were the multi-colored paintings intrusive for you?

MS: I began to reduce number of colors, and go back to larger forms. It was at that time, and I think we talked about this before, I was drawing a great deal, outdoors, out in the dunes, out in the woods. Doing nature scenes to a great extent. The curvilinear quality of natural forms came back in. The question was to make them work for me in the way the more geometric shapes had. It finally came out, late that summer of '54, and through the winter of '55, the summer of '55.

RB: Worked for you without color?

MS: Without color. The first one was a white shape in a black field. I don't think I did more than three paintings that were a black shape in a white field. All the rest, I think, had been white in black. I continued going out and drawing in nature.

RB: This process of reduction, or elimination of color, had been going on whether it was in New York in the '40s or here?

MS: I began to work with a reduced number of colors, and began to simplify shapes in a way I'd been doing with the black and white charcoal drawings, and then carried into the grafites. That was a fairly smooth transition. At first I began to use it entirely in black and white. Then I began to use gray tones, and actually had done one charcoal in gray and white. It seems to me Brown Baker has that now, can't remember. The graphites, instead of a black shape in a white field or vice versa, a third shape, usually integral with the other shape, would be gray. So there would be white and gray and black.

RB: Were you conscious of other artists also working in black and white?

MS: My first attraction to it came from some black and white ones that de Kooning had done, that I had seen way back, in the '40s, then he went totally abstract, the paintings he was doing before he went into the expressionistic women series. I had admired those a great deal. Black and white I had from many sources. Seurat drawings. Mondrian himself.

RB: You say Mondrian "himself," because what -- the definitive colorist?

MS: Whether he was using the primary colors or not, his black and white have a very speaking quality.

RB: An eloquence?

MS: Yes, a telling power. He knew how to use it. And then Kline began to use black and white. But I was already working in black and white at the same time I was working in color, you know. As I say, I tried early on, the winter of '49-'50, I painted a black and white painting, at the same time I was painting the multi-colored, but chiefly red painting that Baker has, and it just didn't come off for me. The charcoal black and white was too much with me. I hadn't learned to translate it into paint. It wasn't until that first winter here in Provincetown, when I painted two fairly large paintings, for me -- 32 by 40.

RB: To translate charcoal into paint, what would that mean?

MS: To make the paint work in the same way that I was able to make the charcoal work for me, to bring the black and white equally alive so they worked together, and still as dynamic as possible. Of course that is what was difficult when I was working with shapes on a field, you still had that balance of the black and white to make in relation to the shape itself and keep everything held together and still dynamic as possible.

RB: It's interdependence you strive for?

MS: Yes, everything in a painting is interdependent. But reducing your means to black and white was a great challenge and a felt need. I didn't do it deliberately at all. It was something that was there and I could work with. I knew it was something that I could make work for me. Everybody has to find out what it is he can do and what it is that will work for him, so he can give himself expression.

RB: But you deprived yourself the relations of color.

MS: No, because black and white are color. By reduction there is a kind of purism--a term that was bandied about much more in the '50s than you hear it now. A reducing of your means to as little as possible so you can say as much as possible. You can say much with color, but you have to say more with black and white. Color is very beguiling, sensuous. With black and white, also sensuous, you have to find out how to use them so they are sensuous and organic, rather than, say, intellectual or mental. A lot of people working with reduced means, many of the good American painters, end up making more intellectual exercises rather than felt expression, I think. I knew I had to find a way to make it a feeling experience, not just to me but to whoever looked at it as well.

RB: This was your direction and you took it. By the late '50s, you were primarily--

MS: I was very much into it, working with three or four or five black and white paintings at a time, keeping them going. I felt that what I was not through with all colors and some of the more expressionistic modes kept coming out in color paintings, but they gradually went away, because I felt that what I was doing with black and white was saying so much more that I was getting from color. I felt I had to finish the black and white, get through with it, before I could go back and give my whole attention to color. I never got there. I was working with black and white up to the point I had to stop painting.

RB: You must have found over the years that the potential for black and white was more than you ever imagined?

MS: It went on and on; there was no end.

RB: Your shapes, which at one time or another you have given classical titles, were these shapes what came first? I think at one point you mentioned that some of your shapes went back to the figure or figure studies. But that was only very ultimately, wasn't it?

MS: That first winter I started working in black and white, they all came from the figure. I had a model. Not the first one -- for some reason that just came to me. After I moved to 11 Brewster Street after being in the Lumberyard, I got a model and worked off and on throughout the winter. The paintings came out of the drawing, some very directly. Sometimes they came through making some charcoals first working with the model, and then I'd go on from there. But as I'm sure I said earlier on, I don't think there's any way to paint except out of visual experience. It's much changed inside one and becomes a kind of amalgam one can draw on. But I think it needs to be refilled, replaced as it's used. I think your visual experience never stops being used.

RB: And by the '60s, were there changes for you?

MS: I began to work more with the graphites, as the '60s went on, '63 and '64, and I stayed with them until I had to quit working in 1980. I was still working on paintings I started, some in the late '50s, and working on charcoals. I had a portfolio full of incomplete charcoal drawings that I may have put aside years before and I would take out and look at and go to work on.

RB: Because these things needed reworking? You will go back without hesitation?

MS: Yes I have always done it. But no, as long as they were not concluded -- I knew something in there most probably was a potential for a solution. I still have a lot that never got quite there. Once I got into painting the black and white series, I can't think of one that I abandoned. I kept working on those and there were some that didn't get finished simply because I didn't have the chance. The ones I did abandon came from that exploratory period, '51-'54. Three or four are very atypical of my painting, pretty good ones, but I never showed them, and I don't know if I ever shall. It was a period of great activity and aliveness for me.

RB: There is an evolution from more angular, geometric paintings to ones with more rounded forms in the mid-1960s. Did this evolution have significance for you from the geometric to the more rounded?

MS: When I first really got back into painting in the late '40s I was working quite geometrically and the first paintings that I was really satisfied with then were geometric, and that continued to the period when I left New York and came up here, and started drawing from nature again. The geometric ones I was drawing from the model, but I was so taken with the possibilities and the esthetic discipline of neo-plasticism, I had to go on and work with that until it changed. When I left the city and decided to come up here for the winter, that's when it sort of came on. I didn't come up here to draw from nature, but I came up here because I knew I had to get away from the city and I knew I needed different sources. I decided, well, I'm a country boy at heart. I didn't really like the city. I grew up in a small town and nature meant much to me. It resulted in a kind of amalgam of the curvilinear nature forms and the geometric discipline in the black and whites.

RB: But it continued the tendency you already had in New York for more loosely painted work.

MS: It was already loosening some. I was painting with a palette knife, combing palette knife with some brushwork, whereas a good many of geometric -- either two colors or three or four colors -- were done with brush and with quite clear edges, as in the first color reproduction in the [Whitney] catalogue ["Quartet," 1948], which was dated '48s I think.

RB: What did you think of a contemporary like Kline who went on with black and white, but looser, with the brush strokes showing and so forth?

MS: When I first knew Kline's work, his brushwork was already very free and he had already developed that calligraphic style. I thought they were such beautiful paintings, they were terrific -- he was someone who knows how to paint black and white, in the same way de Kooning had done.

RB: But you yourself were not inclined to go toward this calligraphic style?

MS: No, artists have different directions, different temperament. Any one of which can be valid if it really produced.

RB: You were interested in refinement, as well as reduction.

MS: People keep saying that -- refinement. It was never refinement for me at all, it was making the thing work and seeing to it that there was no place in the shape, or in the relationship between the black and white, which was not alive. It did require adjustment and changes until it got there. Refinement, I don't think means anything.

Refinement is sort of purifying, doing something to something that already exists, and I was in the creative process until the last brush stroke.

RB: So refinement is a superficial observation, and inaccurate as well.

MS: Well, it's one that's widely used and people think in those terms. By 1963, I know I was doing black and white graphites and gray and white graphites, because there's one that Richard Bellamy has, one I dedicated and gave to him, very, very pale gray and white. Then from that time on, they began to come more and more. My day up here, summer or winter, was to get up early, have some coffee, and read. I told you when I first came here I was reading Greek tragedy again. And that went on with that. I'd read, and then I could sit right here on the sofa [in his living room, not studio] and work on graphites because they were small, I'd have a small drawing board. Then I'd quit that and go in the studio and work on the paintings. Or sometime the graphites would take hold of me and I'd work on it until I finished, and not be painting. But they, like the paintings, tended to be carried so far, then put aside while I worked on something else, then gotten out again. I used to say they almost became accretions. Because there were so many times that I would come back to them again and again.

RB: When you put them aside, was it because you'd lost interest?

MS: No, no, no; no, no; no, no. No, just like the charcoals, I'd work myself out on them, you could say. There is nothing more I can do at the moment. I'm not there. I always felt something else was working on me. And I'd get out something else to work on. It might not be the right thing. Or might have to start anew, or go out and draw. In the '60s I completed charcoals I had started as early as '55, '56, ones I had done from a model. The actual pose of the model had been long gone, but the necessities of the drawing would be all there, and, perhaps because of other work I'd done, I'd find other ways of handling what I already had on the paper.

RB: A great deal of reciprocity and reinforcement between the three mediums.

MS: I think any medium an artist likes becomes very important. It lets what's inside you come out, easily. Charcoal is a very plastic medium, very malleable. And I found this was true of graphite. Back when I'd been a graduate student, I'd worked with lithography, and I was entranced with the quality of the blacks you got from the stone, and from the grays. When I started with the graphites, I found I could get wholly different grays with different papers, or different ways of using the pencil on the paper. And I could get different blacks, for that matter. [end tape 2]

MS: Charcoal, you see, is what you teach with. Because it is so easily useable. It responds to your own urges. You can make a hard dark line. You can smudge it. You can change the tone. You can erase entirely. The old masters used chalks in much the same way.

RB: Great flexibility.

MS: Yes, you can do so many things, and change it in the process. It plastic for the painter on the flat surface just as clay is plastic for the sculptor.

RB: Did you get the precision you got with graphite?

MS: Well, I did. I got great precision with charcoals. I got the sharp black and white differentiation that was necessary to make the whites and blacks vibrate and work together. I don't know anybody who ever used charcoal in the way I did. People who've seen them a long time will still refer to them as paintings, because I could bring it to a completeness, pictorial expression, so it was not just a sketch, but complete as a painting. They would say, that painting over there, when it was a charcoal. They are very developed, and I think that must be rare. I don't claim I am the only one who brought drawing to that completion, but with charcoal. I don't know how I got to it, because it's hard, very hard to do!

RB: It's a medium that tends to be a bit messy.

MS: It wants to smudge. The thing is to do that, and keep it clean. If I messed it too far, I'd lay another piece over it and make a tracing, draw over, seeing through, get the shape as I had it, and I could translate from one sheet to another as long as it was in process. You have to learn not to infringe the black on the white in a way that you can't take it off.

RB: Were there certain surface, textural qualities you couldn't get with oil?

MS: I could get this beautiful black matte, alive. The white is alive if you use the black right. You make the white work to your purpose through what you do with the black.

RB: The charcoal, though matte, is not dead?

MS: No. Then the thing to do is to fix it in such a way so it retains that depth, and not flood it. The greatest difficulty is to put the fixative on so it does not blow the charcoal over the white! Once it's done that, you can't erase it anymore. I learned to blow the charcoal over the drawing while it lay flat, and let it fall down over it, until it the surface held, and I could come closer and blow directly. Did a lot of blowing! But usually I could fix them adequately. I always used a mouth blower, I never used a canned spray, because you can't control the degree of spray. I stood at a distance and blew over it, so I could see the cloud of the mist of the fixative, as it settled. I would blow at it from all sides, and let that go down. Then I would touch it very gingerly, and when I could tell it had enough to hold so I could come closer, then from the white blow into the black. With the fairly simple shapes I had, that was easy, except when there was, say, a white circular thing in the middle of a black. Then you had to be really careful.

RB: You had to mask it out?

MS: Never masked. Never used any masking. With charcoal you could a velvety deep depth in your black. Seurat got it in some of his drawings -- they were mostly black conte, I think. He got beautiful blacks. Of course there are certain printmakers who are able to do it in prints, in oil. I like the oil matte. Working the black and white to your own purposes was the important thing.

RB: Did you use turpentine?

MS: I learned to paint thinly, thin enough so any shine from the paint, so there was no shine from the paint. The one in the catalogue that has blue lines on a black ground [Untitled, 1950, page 21], I wanted it to be matte because I wanted that black depth. The time came when you had to protect the surface of your paintings, and you need a varnish. I did finally use a very matte varnish. What I found was they always came out shiny, and I thought I had absolutely ruined them, but I found with time whatever shine even the matte varnish had, reduced to the point when it did not, in the least, get in the way of the painting.

RB: You wanted depth, why?

MS: Colors have to have their full vibrancy, and that depth has vibrancy. White is space-ness, in a pictorial sense, so you black has to match it. You can't just put black on white. You have to see what each is doing to the other. In order to make them work.

RB: Otherwise, black is just too inert?

MS: It can be. Now that is not just the physical qualities or the way you paint it, it depends on how you see the black and white in terms of the expression you are seeking. Keeping the black and white alive, and never letting the one overwhelm the other. In oil, my blacks, I began to paint very thinly, and by building up the blacks as I developed the shape, I learned to get a good dark and deep black. The surface of an oil painting needs protection. There's no point in putting glass over it, because you make it impossible to see. There's the varnish. The same is true of the black and white paintings -- they can be varnished. If a matte varnish is used it will look too shiny. To me it was always shock ing when I first saw it, but it gradually absorbed.

RB: What did you get from oil that you couldn't get from graphite or charcoal?

MS: It's a different sensuous quality. It is a different black. Oil is more permanent and more plastic than charcoal. Oil paint has a kind of lusciousness to it, even when I was using it in a matte way, it has a warmth and a sensuous. I tried the synthetic mediums and I never could make the colors work, particularly the black. I could never get a black in acrylic that worked for me, so as long as I painted I worked in oil. I've seen other people use acrylic and they worked all right, but they didn't work for me.

RB: There is a liquidity present in oil not present in your two other mediums--graphite and charcoal.

MS: This is true of paint, except with gouache, a kind of dry medium. I never did much with gouache. I never found it satisfying. Watercolor is another matter. I loved watercolor. In my early days I painted a great deal with watercolor, but not from 1946 on -- I don't think I ever used watercolor after that. I liked it, it was a good medium, a nice medium.

RB: Was the liquidity of oil a quality that appealed to you?

MS: Yes, there is a liveliness to an oil surface. Perhaps it is the moistness of the basic oil. Even when the oil is getting very dry, when you painting is very much worked, you tend to lose the moistness of it. It tends to get overly matte. That's when you need varnish to bring back the freshness. The oil sinks into your ground. It can sink into the canvas. If you get through the ground and into the sizing that's under the ground, the oil will get to the canvas the thing will get very matte and actually change the color. All you need is a good varnish to bring it back. It re-vivifies it. But that becomes a conservator's problem, not mine.

RB: But you hoped you had not overworked --

MS: I've had paintings I've had to abandon because I did overwork them. In some cases I had to take the shape and went to work on a fresh canvas. It's very hard to re-paint something that's been painted. In some cases utterly impossible. If you overprint, you just have to abandon the painting. It is a little more possible with the shapes I use because they can be transferred, but they have to be brought back up. It's like the charcoals, of which some have four or five versions, sometimes very close, sometimes more different. It was not re-doing a completed painting, it was re-doing an almost completed painting. They came out very well.

RB: Back twenty years or so there were some younger artists, so-called minimalists. Were you compared with them, say Ellsworth Kelly?

MS: Ellsworth Kelly was painting minimally, I didn't think of him as a real minimalist. I first saw him at one of the Whitney annuals, and there was a similarity there. I liked what I saw that he was doing then, but he went on naturally from what he was doing then, which was closer to some of my pieces, in a different way, and he's gone on into sculpture, too.

RB: You didn't particularly cross paths with some of these people, like Kelly yourself, did you?

MS: No, we met once.

RB: Who were people you did keep up with, say the last 20 years or so? Did you keep up with people from the Hansa Gallery? Or did you deliberately isolate yourself in Provincetown?

MS: I was not isolated at all in the '50s and through the '60s, because I was in New York enough. At the Hansa, there was my friend Jan Muller, Richard Stankiewicz, George Segal. When I went to Greene Gallery -- Alan Kaprow, he was part of Hansa, Lucas Samaras was in there, not a member, but showed with us. And John Chamberland. The first time I ever saw anything of John's was when we invited him to show at the Hansa. We were all friends. Miles and Barbara Forst. Jean Folett. Bellamy had become our director. There were others I was not that close to -- Jane Wilson, Wolf Kahn, and later his wife Emily Mason, whose mother also had a guest show, Alice Trumbull Mason, she was a very good painter. We were always out and about. They came up here. Claus Oldenburg came up here, later, 1960. He was washing dishes somewhere and had a show at the Sun Gallery, pieces of wall sculpture, made of wood, he used driftwood, very different. He went right back to the city. But he showed uptown. Those people were my friends, but I am not getting them all in. I see fewer of them now, because I don't go to the city very much, and they don't come up here as they used to. Practically everybody came up here in the '50s. It was nice for a while when the winters were long, except for the times when I went away. One could get cabin fever. So one thought it was nice when the friends came up in the summer, or occasionally in the spring and fall to have a get-together. There are still people here in the winter, spring and summer, but not in such great numbers. And there is not such great art activity. And I do not feel so obliged to go to all openings and show. Before it was hectic with two or three openings a night. So I welcomed the slowing down of the artistic life here.

RB: At some point, early, you started out thinking you might be a concert pianist?

MS: No, I didn't start out thinking that. I was a pianist, but I always thought of myself as an amateur. I did not expect to be a concert pianist.

RB: But you did think you might be -- what?

MS: I wanted to keep my music up, and I wanted to use it in some way.

RB: Did you think you'd been a teacher?

MS: No. When I was younger and playing and devoting a great deal of time to my music, I had a keen hankering to be an architect. I decided I wanted to go to Carnegie. By the time I got to college age, I found out I didn't have any money. It was post-World War I depression in the '20s, '23-'24, the depression before that last big surge that brought on Black Thursday, or whatever.

RB: There was a great agricultural depression after World War I.

MS: Yes, and mine was an agricultural community. I didn't have any money, and here there was a college at home, so there I went. I had a double major, one in English, one in history.

RB: Why did you want to be an architect? Did you want to build?

MS: Yes, I had that kind of urge -- I had it all my life.

RB: Is there any comparability between that and your paintings?

MS: Oh, I think so. I think my feeling for architectural expression and the use of space, the sense of space, together with the way music is constructed, in the spatial and rhythmic sense of music -- those were very important in forming my artistic career. You don't paint with just one side of you. You have to paint with everything. If you're a musician, you don't compose with just one side. Musicians are less blind than writers. I think writers don't see painting as well as musicians do. I think dancers seem to see art well. Occasionally a writer will see art very well. There have been some very good writers who had a feeling for the pictorial. But you do use all of your experience. It goes into this inner core, or amalgam, and one thing touches off another, a movement touches off many things for a painter. Movement is the exercising of oneself in space. Dancing, or the way a leaf falls -- it's a sensation. They can come out in portrait, dance, but they are all interrelated inside one. I was fortunate to have different impulses that got some development, and were there to be incorporated in painting.

RB: Having carried architecture or music so far, it benefitted later?

MS: Oh, yes, right from the beginning. The sense of composition and structure, the sense of composing a painting is so close to a musical composition, or a structure, or a poem, even the most extended novel, Proust, for instance. I didn't get much except from my own dancing, which I had always done, from the time I went to dancing school at the age of seven with black patent leather pumps. My sense for that was always there. I had seen good dance troupes in Denton, but when I got to New York and could see a whole season of, say, Martha Graham or the New York City Ballet. I used to go quite regularly. I got the sense there how close creative dance and pictorial creation can be. Opera was always very important to me, which is a real combination of art forms.

RB: Were there things in you work that changed that you can point out?

MS: I don't think there were the kind of formative changes that came earlier. If I could work now, the material for painting an drawing would still be there. I'm really such a slow painter. I couldn't work fast enough to do all the things I wanted to do.

RB: Pretty much the way it was in the '50s.

MS: I worked faster in the '50s. I slowed down in the '70s, but I worked very constantly and very hard through the '70s. The one result was that I turned more to graphites, where I could get the new impulses out quickly. There were variations on the curvilinear forms and back to geometric form, there is a tall slender graphite drawing, untitled, with shading from dark to light, perfectly straight line. It was very geometric, but it was also in tone, it varied from a dark gray to a light gray so that the whole thing, though geometrical had a softness and sensuousness to it. Varying things kept coming. Some geometric, some curvilinear. My creative impulses were still plenty. I was not blessed with the facility of rapidness. I work slowly.

RB: You ponder?

MS: Yes, that's one of the things about working on something and putting it away -- you get a fresh vision and you get them out after leaving them alone for awhile. With any painter you paint awhile and you may paint very furiously and work for a long time, just backing off and coming back, and then at some point you back off to the other end of the studio and sit down. Pick up a magazine, do something else. Then you look up at it -- you may distract yourself, you may go work on it or you may just sit there looking at it. But I was never a fast worker, except with watercolors, because you have to, but I haven't done that for a long time -- almost entirely landscapes.

RB: When you discovered your eyesight was going, what steps did you take? You must have had some knowledge that this could possibly happen?

MS: NO, I had no knowledge of it. It must have been the fall of '78 when it was diagnosed. It wasn't very bad then at all -- I was having no trouble reading or painting. I got an assistant. My show at the Whitney was already scheduled and there were certain works I wanted to get done. So I worked with him and was able to do some of the things I wanted. We worked together through 1980, till after the show. Then it was impossible for me to work at all. He [Chuck Anderson] was a young painter himself, very good, who worked, by the way, a great deal with graphite, in black and white. He'd been here at the Center, and had done some very nice work and my was congenial to him and his was congenial to me. He made an ideal studio assistant, from the fall of '78 to around Christmas 1980.

RB: You spent a lot of time on your journals, going over them?

MS: Since then, yes, I turned to the journals which I had started -- I didn't start it as a formal journal. I just began to jot down things that were on my mind. The early parts of it are on odd pieces of paper, pieces of Bristol

board, which I had in my studio, trimmed off and jotted something down. 1950 was a period of great stimulation to me. I was doing a great deal of painting, a great deal of reading, a great deal of everything. I wanted to clarify my ideas and get them down. I kept at it, off and on, for 16 years. Then I don't know why I stopped. I guess I'd said it, put down everything I thought was worthwhile putting down. I've worked on the manuscript since -- I don't know, have we discussed this?

RB: Not much. [interview end]