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Oral history interview with Vivian Browne,
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Transcript

Interview

HG: HENRI GHENT
VB: VIVIAN BROWNE

HG: This is Henri Ghent interviewing Miss Vivian Browne, painter. Miss Browne, where were you born?

VB: I was born in Florida. I think it was Tampa, but I'm not sure. It was northern Florida.

HG: Northern Florida. And the date? What date were you born?

VB: Oh, must I tell you that?

HG: Oh, yes, I think it's important.

VB: You think it's important? All right. I was born in April, 1929.

HG: And you are an only child?

VB: No, I have three sisters, and two of them are older and one is younger.

HG: I see.

VB: The four of us girls grew up together, and all except one are artistically inclined.

HG: Very interesting. Did you want to talk about them?

VB: Oh, just a little. They're all married and all have children. Two are living in the south now. One in Virginia and one in North Carolina. The one in North Carolina has four children and I think two of them are geniuses, of course.

HG: Really?

VB: Oh, yes. The one in Virginia is a teacher. She's teaching English which is rather strange because she was very good in art. Excellent. And the other one is a housewife.

HG: How do you account for the fact that, as you said, many of you are artistically inclined? In your family that is.

VB: Well, my father painted when I was a child and we all used to watch him. He painted in oils and he painted after work. He was very slow but he stuck to it. He also did some craft work, woodwork. He had a shop in the cellar. And was very much involved, I suppose. It seems that he stopped, oh, when I was about fourteen. Working and painting, I suppose, didn't do to much for him. My mother is an excellent designer and seamstress. She made clothes for us for as long as I remember. And, as a matter of fact, right now I'm having trouble buying clothes because I don't know how to shop. Mother made clothes for everything, suits, coats, dresses, everything. And she designed them as well. So, I think, actually from both of them we got something. A kind of taste and a kind of selection they both have. It wasn't a big thing in our house as children. As a matter of fact, when I started painting my mother was horrified, absolutely horrified. And she is the reason I went into teaching, actually. But it's an air somehow. We didn't go to museums as children. We didn't have that thing where now children are taken to museums and they're taking to special art classes and they do all sorts of things to these little children. We didn't have that, but we had a lot of music. We just had the air, I suppose, to get along.

HG: Did you receive your early education in Florida?

VB: No, I was born in Florida and stayed there two months, and came to New York. Grew up in Jamaica, Long Island. All my education was in New York. Various places. Elementary school was, oh, that was a wonderful time, elementary school. I remember that very, very well. And then the other schools. I went to Hunter College and at Hunter I majored in art -- had the usual liberal arts education. When my mother decided that I should teach, I tried to get an education course at Hunter then and they told me I was not suitable. So I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in art.

HG: I take it that you liked going to school?

VB: Oh, yes. I liked that very much.

HG: What fascinated you so much about school?

VB: I think it was the things I learned that were new that I had no idea of, at any other time. I wasn't that good a student. I was fair. But there were so many things that were fascinating I just simply didn't have any inkling of.

HG: You were curious about a great amount of things, I suppose?

VB: Oh, yes. Yes. I wanted to be a scientist and a doctor. And I minored in music. I was very, very taken with art history and English literature was fascinating as well. There were just so many directions I wanted to go in. I didn't start painting until I was a senior in college. When I began that then all those directions came into one.

HG: Why do you think you waited until you were a senior in college to start painting?

VB: Oh, I went through a great deal of courses of study. And I suppose that's what it was. I started painting in oils when I was a senior, but before that I painted in watercolor. Which was fine, but it didn't have the strength, you know, the drawing power that oil painting has. It kind of latches on to you. And color you can do with much more ease somehow.

HG: Do you recall any sounds, tactile feelings and visual associations as a child that influenced you in your work and in your life?

VB: Well, just off the top of my head, the thing I remember so much is saying when I was in high school and even earlier that I would never leave Long Island because of the greenery. And I still get charged out with greenery, you know; I love the mountains and I love the outdoors. Of course, I don't feel the same way about Jamaica, Long Island, but I think that that was very lasting with me. And it was very important, somehow. It still is important to get out, to be where things are growing naturally. I don't think there is any other association with that. Unless, of course, perhaps, it is psychological, you know, the kinds of things I paint now really are.

HG: Well, let's talk about your ethnic and spiritual background as a child.

VB: Well, as a child we all went to church regularly. I like church.

HG: You still do?

VB: No. No. I don't know why I liked it; perhaps because it was another social thing. I believed very strongly in everything there. I went to Sunday school every Sunday. And just grew up in all the phases. I belonged to the junior choir. Of course, all of us belonged to the junior choir and we had a piano. I took piano lessons. I loved the piano, too, and liked the lessons. When we would come home from church or from choir practice we would all sing together. And that was part of the church. Seldom did we sing other kinds of songs.

HG: What faith are you?

VB: Methodist.

HG: I see.

VB: And I then became a member of the adult choir and I taught in Sunday school. And did all the things that one does. There was Youth fellowship. I had quite a few little projects going with the kids, you know, the neighborhood kids, when I was teaching them. It was pretty full. My sister married a minister, by the way. It was about the time, oh, I graduated from college and I think about a year or two after that I just stopped going to church. I stopped because I couldn't reconcile the regimented worship with what was supposed to be, at least what they told us was a, you know

HG: Now what about your childhood reading habits? Did you read a lot as a child? What sort of things did you read?

VB: Oh, I hardly remember. I read all the childhood story books. I read avidly, as a matter of fact, and not discriminatively. I just read lots of things. Often I was quite lazy about it and read the easier and more pleasant things. I suppose that pattern follows now because I read novels, mysteries. And well, of course, with school work, you know, there is other selective reading and that became rather interesting. I didn't charge ahead and do that too much. I did all the required reading. As a child I was ostracized from reading.

HG: Oh?

VB: Yes, my sisters are very pretty and were very popular. When we began mixing with boys we stayed together. Of course, mother decided that's the way it should be. And the boys didn't like it if you read, you know. I would spend summers in the library, for instance, reading one thing after the other, just picking things off the shelf. And they knew it. And they teased me dreadfully about that. It became a thing, you know; I would have to hide the fact. It was really pretty terrible when I finally got to college because you just don't do that. And it was awful. I would say about that that's something that I really had to think about a great deal because of the social thing, you know, being ostracized sort of. It's very difficult for a girl. And I think what happened was I, in hiding it, you know, I began to hide it from me so that I wouldn't go as far as I could go in intellectual curiosity. I think it's really rather detrimental at this point.

HG: Getting back to your really artistic leanings. Can you remember the first thing you'd draw? I mean that you drew?

VB: I don't remember the first thing. I remember something that stands out in my mind very much and that was a portrait of my sister, when I was about, oh, eleven, twelve. It was in pastel, and it was the sister that was closest to me in age and she is just lovely. She was an impish person and the thing that I remember about it was that I got the impish quality in her face. And it was again delicate. It was delicately drawn and colored. I remember about that that she was very nice to sit for me because she could not sit still, ever. she just couldn't.

HG: But she sat for the portrait?

VB: Yes. Yes, she did that.

HG: What were some of the other things you drew?

VB: Oh, I did a lot of people. I didn't draw things as much. It as always people as far back as I can remember. Whenever I was asked to do a poster, for instance, you know, posters can very often be rigid and mechanical. As a matter of fact, they are sometimes much more exciting that way. I always did people.

HG: People, people.

VB: People, people all the time.

HG: They fascinate you. Do you know why?

VB: Always have. Well, no, I don't know exactly why. I guess I really like people very much but people are so complex. And I react to people very visually, and I always have. What shows on a face or in a carriage or in a stance, even, is such an indication of what's inside. People are so closed up, really. And if you can look, you know, through all of that and get it down I find that when I paint portraits, for instance, I can look and not even be conscious of this X-ray thing that's going on. After a couple of hours, I stop and look at what I've done, and it becomes the most revealing thing. I've done this several times when people have, well, one fellow got very angry with me. As a matter of fact, he didn't speak to me for two years because I painted his portrait. Well, he wanted it and I can't turn it off, you know. It happens. Now, of course, I'm not painting portraits very much, but the things that came in the painting of the portraits are being revealed in the kind of painting I do now.

HG: You had religious training. Do you think there's any religious influence in your work today as an adult, as a professional painter? Do you think any of that training can be found in your work as an influence?

VB: There is a trace, I guess. I don't think my painting is judgmental but I do think that it could not be if I didn't have some felling of what a human being is at best, you know. And that is a rather religious concept.

HG: Having seen a lot of your work, I wouldn't say that you are a person who tries to escape reality, because it's very realistic, almost everything I've seen that you've done. Do you feel completely compelled? What compels you to bring out this reality, to stop reality?

VB: It would be very nice to say it's a search for the truth, but I really don't know what truth is. But it's seeking what is real in among all the crap, you know; there has to be something that's real. I find that when I try to abstract an idea it's merely an abstraction. But if I paint an idea in terms of a person of a sort or a person interacting then the idea is clearer and it's more real somehow. I've always been strongly involved with form in painting, often to my regret. Because one can get hung up on form and just, you know, make a pretty form, and the idea's gone. It's always a battle, but I don't think I could possibly exclude you called it a realism, I guess, but it isn't really realism. It's not realism as we think of it. It's like a, well, the advance of pop artists is realistic. It isn't that. I guess it's more a flowing from an abstract expressionist idea with an actual person involved.

HG: How would you describe your style of painting? I've seen landscapes, I've seen still-life and we discussed

this transition which you are currently going through. How would you describe your style of painting?

VB: Oh, my, that's a very difficult question. I don't know. People often ask me that, you know. "What kind of painting do you do; what style is it?" And I fall back on the word "realistic." Representational is really what it is. But after the transition it's not really representational. So I would say, then, that it's representational towards a surrealist aspect. Is it labels? You know, they are so hard.

HG: You mentioned earlier that this current medium that you're working in, these figures of men with enlarged heads and sort of tortured faces, and you said that people are well shocked by that sometimes. Why do you suppose that is?

VB: Well, I think that paintings are pictures of people who happen, who are afraid. First of all, they are afraid. Secondly, they are not strong enough. And there they are, really, at a standstill. One or two of the paintings are humorous in a kind of way. It's like standing off, looking and watching somebody go through his little dance and you know he's just going to play and he's not going to do anything. But I think that since the paintings show people not at their best, often at their worst, it's hard to look at. I have a painting of two fat women. And if a huge female walked in here and looked at that, she'd have probable problems. And also, well, then, they have looked at them and had problems. Not because they were so huge, but because they were perpetually dieting and couldn't, you know, they just couldn't deal with it. And that's only a small thing. The paintings of the men are so much involved with self-love and sex, with drinking and things. They are problems. But, yes, it's hard to look at. As you say, people are afraid of the reality. But I think that looking at that should not, perhaps, invoke fear so much as interest action. But this really doesn't happen. People just cut off, you know; they take on glance and they just cut right off. They won't discuss it either which would be helpful.

HG: You also said that that sort of attitude disturbed you, understandably. But have you come to grips with these attitudes towards your work?

VB: I think that I have. Every once in a while I have to give myself a little vitamin pill and re-understand the reasons why this is disturbing other people. But I think I have come to grips with it and actually have to. Because if not, I can't paint anymore. This isn't something that is painted at all lightly. It's something I had to dig for. I spent actually four months doing oil sketches on paper. I've got stacks of sketches in there. Jimmy Baldwin has a way of saying it. He says that you have to vomit first. And that's what those sketches did. They mostly opened the whole thing up. I could not touch a canvas with that idea until I'd gone through that whole business. I'm just working around that question you asked me but it took that and it continues to take that. Because each new painting is a whole new pulling and digging; it is very, very, very real and meaningful. And when I'm confronted by people who can't deal with it, on one hand I'm sorry that they can't. Because once you see and you feel this kind of thing then personally you know more about yourself, and you most certainly know more about the world. And you can relate to people better. I think that as a painting that's what it should do. It should help you to do those things. But when people turn away from it, then obviously they're not able to do that in their smallest hours, to say nothing of any expansive qualities they may have. It's disappointing.

HG: Are you yourself plagued many times by inner tensions or anxieties?

VB: Oh, yes, I am. Who isn't? I have quite a few of them. But the big one is a large conflict between my way of earning money and painting. At one time I stopped earning money in order to paint. I earn money by teaching. Right now I'm a supervisor of the Board of Ed. And that happened just as an accident. It's a constant conflict. With that kind of job you can imagine what's left for painting. It's five days a week, nine to five, and being a Sunday painting artist is not exactly the best thing in the world. So I always have to balance these two things and try to work them out. There is the necessity of keeping a roof over my head. Many people say you can do it with much less trauma but somehow I seem to have only this ability. That's a personal conflict. There are maybe many other things. The business of being black in this country. It's something I don't verbalize very well, but it's always there and one has it constantly, you know. And in this field it's

HG: Have you ever encountered racial prejudice as a black artist?

VB: Not directly.

HG: Would you elaborate on that?

VB: I can't really give you an incident as a black artist. I've been in mixed shows and been in only black artist shows and it hasn't been a problem that way. But somehow the very fact that you're in a black artist show means to me that there is prejudice, because otherwise it would not be necessary. That's why I say not directly.

HG: In recent years with the steady rise of black nationalism, has this affected you and your approach to your work?

VB: No. It has affected me. It hasn't affected my approach to my work as such. I think you mean has the protest movement or idea come into my work, and that has not happened. I think my work has protest in it anyway and had before the rise. But you see that's another problem because I think, you know, an artist has problems which are set for him as he works, or she, and the working out of the problems takes every single part of the artist and his life and his society and all that stuff. But that problem and that painting is where the artist should be. I have a big problem with this because there are some painters that I respect very, very highly. They are protest painters but they were always protest painters. I mean that's the way they were going; that's their progress and that's their movement. You know, that's their whole thing. I have not been a protest painter and I think that there are also many artists who switched right now because they said, and rightly so, artists should do something as well as writers and as well as musicians. They should be saying something, too. And I agree with this wholeheartedly. However, I think, if you have an instrument, you do it.

HG: So, does that mean you are not concerned with Negro subject matter per se? You just want to paint.

VB: I can't say that I'm not concerned because I have painted Negro subject matter. And I painted them as they are, you know, just beautiful people. Also in my work it comes out as you see, it just comes naturally. However, if it comes in my road as artist, and since I am in this revolution it bounces into it, but it must come that way. I cannot force it.

HG: Right. Would you prefer to be known as an artist who is a Negro or a black artist?

VB: I think an artist who is a Negro is . . .

HG: Preferable to you?

VB: . . . preferable to me.

HG: Do you think that the Negro artist should now direct his efforts to the black community? That is, by exhibiting exclusively in black communities and colleges, universities, etc?

VB: No, I don't think that. I think that the artist should exhibit in black sections of the communities and colleges. And I think that the artist should, the black artist, should share whatever knowledge he has with black communities and black universities. At the same time, I do not think the artist should segregate himself.

HG: Is there any one person who has helped you personally toward self-realization? Any one person?

VB: There was a teacher I had. His name is Anthony Tony who helped me in a very interesting way. First of all, I was in his class and I liked very much what he did. He was a very good teacher, an excellent teacher. And I followed him around and the second summer I followed him up to Tanglewood. There was a workshop up there. Of course, he was quite vocal and he could explain things very, very well. Which is one of the reasons I followed him. And it got to the point that I was turning out little Tonys. And one morning at breakfast -- it was near the end of the workshop -- he told me to just get the hell out of his class and go and live and paint, and stop all this putting around. Well, he helped me a great deal. I suffered terribly but that was very helpful.

HG: Now, you've told me that you're a graduate of Hunter College here in New York. Have you attended an art school?

VB: No. No, I went to the Art Students League for a short time.

HG: I see. What is your evaluation of art schools? do you think it's possible to be taught how to paint, to be guided, to be spot checked? Or what have you?

VB: Depends upon the age, your level of development. I think that when you're beginning, an art school is quite helpful. But after awhile it's necessary to just go and paint on your own. And after awhile means about three, four years. I've been called a self-taught artist. One of the reasons is that I never did go to an art school, except recently at Pratt Graphic Central, which I don't really count as an art school because that's run like a workshop. The instructor will leave you alone unless he feels that there's something wary or unless you pester him. But it's not the same thing.

HG: I noticed that you're also working in prints now. Do you want to talk about those?

VB: Oh, yes. I'm fascinated with etching. I had a little in college for about a year. And, of course, that was a long time ago. Then I began working again at a job, finding that it was quite difficult to paint. I had an opportunity to take a course in etching, and I've been doing that now for about a year and a half. And in that year and a half I think I've made such tremendous progress. I don't know exactly why but somehow I must relate to this medium very well. It has a certain strength in and of itself; in painting you must apply that strength, but in etching it comes of the material and the working of all of the things that go into it. And etching has helped me see so

much in my painting. I'm able to get a great deal of contrast in etching. If you'll notice that painting sometimes blends rather, really, the contrast is not strong. I like strong contrast. So that with etching I can get that going, I think, and now I can apply it to painting.

HG: So you will probably continue to etch?

VB: Yes. I have to work it out. Because, when you're etching, you don't paint. So I have to work it out in the coming months so that I can etch for awhile and then paint. Most artists do this. It's true that an etching is a much longer process and yet it's a much more removed process.

HG: Let's talk about when and how did a personal identity apart from your family begin? When did you begin to really find yourself as a person and an artist?

VB: I was very late doing that. I didn't leave home until late. Let me go back a little bit. When I graduated from college it was difficult to get a job. So I began working at the National Board of the YWCA on Fifty-third Street. I was a mail clerk there.

HG: With a college degree?

VB: Oh, yes. I took my portfolio because in my course I had had commercial work and all of that. I took that around and they said, "No, you haven't had any experience so we can't hire you." And this went on, so I had to have a money-paying job, so there I was. And there I met someone whose uncle or father was a superintendent of schools in South Carolina. She was disturbed that I had a college degree and was working as a mail clerk, and so she interceded for me and they needed someone immediately. So after a year as a mail clerk I went to South Carolina. Now one would think that going there to live and work for two years I had become independent of my family. But I hadn't; I couldn't wait to get home. And I came home. It was some years after that that I began feeling a little bit independent. Then I left and got my own place. would you like to know the age?

HG: Yes.

VB: I was about twenty-five, I guess, or six, which is late for an artist. I didn't feel independent as an artist. I was feeling the need to get away and alone and to work out the painting. But it didn't come very easily and it took a couple more years before I got on to accepting the fact. You see, now that's pretty hard if you've grown up in a very bourgeois kind of setting and then suddenly you're an artist. I think a person just fights it both ways. You want to be accepted by your family. You want them to think you're wonderful and yet you want to make it in this other world. So it becomes ridiculous and I'm slow and it was late. When I had been working in New York as a teacher for maybe eight years I got a fellowship to the Huntington Hartford Foundation in California. I went there for six months. It was there that I really realized that this is what I was. It's funny because everyone there was working very hard and trying very hard. And I had been accepted to go there with my slides and my reasons for going and all of that but it was a very frightening thing, you know. I'd have to produce and I didn't know that I could do that. Well, then, after being there for maybe a month a routine set in and I worked from morning to night. And after dinner -- you know what they do there, they give you a house. You have a whole house and it's all yours. They deliver your lunch so you are not disturbed while you are working and they fix dinner. You go to dinner. So after dinner I would go back and work some more. And this was a steady diet. After that you just can't, you don't let go of that too quickly. And it was a turning point.

HG: You think that was when the maturation process began to assert itself?

VB: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. It was then also I learned how much I didn't know. How much I had to do. Because you can do this in your little apartment or whenever you're all alone, forever and ever. And there's no gauge. But there I found out. It was very good.

HG: Sounds like a wonderful six months.

VB: Oh, it was unbelievable.

HG: Let's talk about some of your friends and associates in the art world and your early heroes.

VB: Well, my earliest was Jacob Barnes. He was the earliest hero I had that I know, now. But before that they were people like, well, there was Van Gogh and Frans Hals and Cezanne. That's constant, Cezanne still is, that whole group. Not Picasso so much. Gauguin somewhat, but later Baziotes, and de Kooning. Grace Hartigan's one, I think, is still a fine painter, very good. Later ones are not too clear in my mind. They all get mixed up. But those are clear. I met Romaare Bearden when I was living in Jamaica. We were both in an outdoor show that was given by a neighborhood association. And I really was turned on with his work. He was an abstractionist. And color was just -- it was just superb. I'll never forget that. He's always been one of my heroes. I think, of course, if I thought about it longer I probably would come up with more. but I think that those, with Cezanne at the top of

the list. I think those are the list.

HG: Do you have many artist friends?

VB: Not many, some. I know quite a few. Well, I really can't count them. As close friends, I have two. As acquaintances there are quite a good many, I would say. Most of them are black artists. It's a very strange thing because in my other work I generally am in a white world. And, of course, I'm supervising in the art department. So there opportunity is always there to meet white artists, but not that much. And one doesn't get that close. I know about four white artists. Two of them are rather prominent. But you know it doesn't mean anything.

HG: I suppose it doesn't.

VB: No, no. I always thought that when artists go together that they would exchange a great deal. That they would give and take and it would be a good thing. I assume writers do. I've seen and heard writers talk to each other. And expected the same thing from artists, but I've long learned that that just doesn't happen.

HG: Why do you suppose that's true?

VB: I think it's because of the tremendous competition in this field, especially in New York. In California it was different. There were twelve people at that Foundation when I went there, it grew to twenty. About a quarter of the population were artists. And we visited and we enjoyed exchanging ideas and exchanged books and addresses and contacts, everything. Now, of course, it maybe was the nature of the Foundation. Our getting together was important. It was a very concentrated period for all of us. But we've all kept in touch. Most of us have, and we still exchange. All those people were white. Negroes, there are few of us who have that kind of thing. But I think it is because of the competition and because of city living. In New York you just cant, it's such a pace.

HG: Yes, I've heard of that. Do you have a desire to break or bend conventions personally or artistically? What are your feelings on that subject?

VB: Yes, I've heard of that. Personally I would like to break conventions, but not really overtly. I think that I would just like to be able to live the way I want to live and do what I want to do without having to think of what that's going to mean for other people or how they're going to react to it. Oh, when you say conventions, I don't know what that means really. I mean having dinner at six o'clock or wearing the right things for the right occasions or having the right kind of family life. I really don't know what that means -- convention. Sometimes you think of convention as being, you know, like two people being married. That's a conventional set-up. And if I were to say I wanted to break convention in that way, that wouldn't be true. But I really think that there is a lot of holding back and there is a lot of concern with other people and what they think. I know that I have this perhaps because of my background, because of my family. And I would like to break away from that. I would like to be able to do exactly what I wanted to do when I want to do it and for whatever reason. But that's not really possible for me.

HG: You've told me that you work as a supervisor in the Board of Education here in New York. Tell me more about your job. Describe a typical day in your working life.

VB: All right. I arrive at a school about nine o'clock in the morning. And it may be an elementary school or a junior high school. If it's an elementary school there's one art teacher and I go visit her and observe a class or two and then have a conference with her. And then have a conference with the principal to discuss what we discussed in her class. And this is a service job. The supervisor is there to help a teacher in any way that's possible, to train her and to get better teaching. So that can be how I would spend a morning, after seeing at least three people. And then in the afternoon Usually if I went to the elementary school in the morning, I'd go to a junior high in the afternoon. There they would have anywhere from four to five art teachers. And I'd do the same thing. Visit the class, conference with the teacher, and demonstrate a lesson if that was called for or intercede between her and the principal if that's called for. Do all the things that are necessary to make her life easier that I can do. And it may be a matter of getting her some supplies or it may be a matter of helping her with discipline which it usually is in these days. By scheduling your program, whatever. And then there are often meetings of one kind or another. Now there are more community meetings between the district staff and the community. We set up exhibits usually within the school and within the district and the city. You change or arrange for intervisitation between teachers and schools so that their ideas can get together. And the workshop which may be within a school day or after a school day and this is for teacher training often. Well, there are many, many different aspects of the main job. There isn't really a typical day. But we do all of those things and more.

HG: Do you look upon this job as supervisor as a means of livelihood or do you derive some measure of satisfaction from your work there?

VB: It's a means of livelihood mainly, now. When I began this last year it was very, very different and very interesting. But now it's eventually turned into something still different. And it's full of an interest but in this kind of job, you know, it's mainly a service job. So that there are not the compensations that you get in teaching, for example. In teaching you can watch a child grow from one month to the next. And at the end of ten months you know something's happened to him. And you see him go out and come back. And that's a tremendous satisfaction. Because you know that something has been accomplished. Well, in supervising maybe from September to June you can watch a teacher grow, but in June she leaves. She leaves the school, she leaves the system. So that there is no way of perpetuating a development. And at the end of the year there isn't anything that you can say "I did." You know, "That's mine, I did that." And no matter what anybody says, you know, you work because you know that it helps, somehow it helps. but you need that. You need a little pat every once in awhile to say you know something happened.

HG: Well, when do you paint then? Oh, I suppose on weekends.

VB: Yes, on weekends and in afternoons, nighttime during the week. If it's been a particularly tough day, let's just say if I've seen more than six people then it's much too tiring. I can't paint after that. But if it's been an office kind of day, then I can paint.

HG: Do you always paint here in your studio in Greenwich Village or do you go outside to paint?

VB: Oh, yes, I always paint here. At one time I had a separate studio and that worked very well when I again was not working at a job. But I didn't get too much done when I was working. It's a good idea though, I think, to have a separate studio. It's kind of, you have a separation and it's very good not to have a telephone and the, you know, easy access, all of the distractions that there are.

HG: I believe you told me that you taught for eight years in a public school. Is that right?

VB: Yes, before going to California.

HG: I see. Tell me about your teaching career.

VB: Oh, well, I began teaching in South Carolina. I had had absolutely no training in education because, as I told you, they didn't think I was material at Hunter. And they didn't think that because I had a lisp. So when I went to South Carolina, I taught in a Negro high school which had many vocational courses. There were two in Columbia and I was at Booker T. Washington. That was very difficult. The first year I just didn't know how I was going to make it, but it became better. And there were many community activities in the south. You know, the high school was the center of all social activities. And that helped. In the city here you don't have quite that much, although everyone is trying to do that now. Then after that I worked at something else. Oh! I was a secretary for awhile. A Dictaphone secretary. At the National Board of Presbyterian missions. And I got terribly bored with that. At least in the classroom you had your own room and you were the boss. Being a secretary was pretty tough. So I went back to teaching and I taught at a junior high school in Bayside, Queens. It was a brand new school and was quite a job. From there I went to another junior high school in Brooklyn which was designated one of the most difficult schools in the city. I met some wonderful people there. One of the artists I know taught there. And from there I went to high school. In high school it was a paradise in comparison to junior high school teaching. After I got to high school I began painting much more seriously. Somehow the two worked together. That was a good experience. I taught in that high school for, oh, almost seven years before I went, you know . . . and then I finally quit. I resigned. It was the year after I had come back from California because I couldn't stand not painting anymore. And after you teach for awhile and all in all I taught for eleven years in the classroom. After such a period of time as this is, it stagnates, you know. And the children begin answering different, different classes the children begin answering questions in exactly the same way, exactly the same way, exactly the same words. And the routine is just so, it's just all rote. And your mind begins to go around in little circles. So I had to resign. I really didn't want to, because again there's the security business. But I couldn't get a leave of absence or anything like that because art is not considered really that important in the school system. You look surprised. No, it isn't. If anything goes, you know, like this year funds are being cut. And art teachers are being let go. That's the first thing. This year some things are being de-centralized and my department at the Board of Education is the first one to be de-centralized. So you have this. At any rate I couldn't get a leave of absence because of that. So I resigned. And intended to stay resigned forever, but it didn't work out that way. There is something very wonderful about teaching. I don't mean to say that it's all boring and that it's all drudgery because it isn't. There is something that just sparks you and you do get a great deal from children. In high school they're at a point where things are very, very exciting and they are knowledgeable enough and they are energetic enough so that they pursue their curiosities. And their pursuit sparks you in your thinking and your ideas. It's a good occupation and it really can be a fine thing. I think that if we're able to teach, if one were able to teach, maybe in some colleges it's possible, without all the trappings that go with teaching, it would be the best thing that an artist can do to earn a living. It really is the best thing.

HG: You speak of art as being sort of a step-child education. Do you think that the government should subsidize the arts in this country?

VB: Oh, yes, oh, wholeheartedly, yes. I've always thought that. I think that the government subsidizes so many things that it is necessary. And I think it's necessary for this country, and not really so much for the individual artists because that artist knows he has to fight. He's going to fight. But it's necessary for this country to heed what an artist gives to people, what the artist's purpose is. Because we've been going along in one direction for such a long time and it's frightening, it's dreadful what's happening and what can happen. You know, mechanization and industrialization and with little robots going on. And it's only the artist who can save people from this, if only just letting them look and see. If it's a responsible government then it is incumbent upon it to keep this alive rather than sitting on it all the time, you know, trying to stamp it out. I really think it's frightening what can happen. And I also think that the government is beginning more and more to realize that something has to balance this materialistic world that we've built up here. There isn't anything at all else but the artist to do that.

HG: You've told me that you have travelled and studied in California. Have you done any other traveling in the United States or abroad?

VB: Oh, now, the United States has been limited. My travel has been limited to the East coast and West coast, and south to Georgia and north to, not too far, Massachusetts. Then one summer I went to Mexico. I had a friend there and stayed for awhile. I like Mexico very much.

HG: What impressed you most about Mexico?

VB: Mexico is stark to me. There isn't a lot of screening. And I like that. I like the evidence of history in Mexico. In Europe, of course, you know, there's evidence of history all over. But here so close to California it was good. And I liked the people, Mexican people. They seem to be strong and true and fine. You know when I was there it seemed to be a very, very young populace taking care of the government and everything. Everywhere you looked, in any of the institutions or in the banks, in the health places, they were all very young people. And they were all very, very serious. Oh, it's a serious country. And it's devastating in a way because they have all these beautiful buildings in Mexico City. It's really rather lovely. Have you been to Mexico?

VB: No, I have not.

VB: Oh, you should go, it's really lovely, but they have beggars all along the street. Every street. And the Indians, you know, their segregation or discrimination is pretty bad. There's no overt discrimination. But there are Indians walking along just as all these well-dressed Mexicans are walking along. The Indians are always barefooted and dressed in thousands of yards of woven things, you know, very beautiful. And they sit on the street there. They bring things in to see if they can sell them. And you see these things one next to the other. There are mounds of silver goods sold in Mexico and it looks so rich and so elegant. And you turn your head slightly and there's a beggar. It's a terrible contrast.

HG: It's depressing.

VB: Very depressing. But very rich, you know, very rich in meaning.

HG: I know that you're preparing to leave for Europe very shortly, in the next couple of days, as a matter of fact. Have you been to Europe before?

VB: Yes, I was in Europe in 1955. I went for a summer vacation for two months. I went to London and France and then to Paris and then to southern France. And then to Italy. I remember when I left, I went by ship with a friend; she had been before so she was calm about the whole thing. But I cried and I was very frightened. We landed in Plymouth, England, and I just withdrew. I withdrew completely. I just couldn't deal with this transition. Even after eight days on the water it was very difficult. But you know what I was afraid of. I guess it was really ignorance because I hadn't traveled much in this country. That was before I went to Mexico and before I went anywhere really. You know, Negroes didn't at that time travel much. And I know one of the reasons, you just couldn't get accommodations and couldn't be comfortable, and I felt that I would find that it was the same thing there. That I would be a Negro, you know, in a white world. And that was very frightening. Plus I couldn't live up to any of the brilliance that I was sure I would encounter. But after being in England for awhile I began to come out a little bit, and I found that in Europe you are not a Negro. You're a person. And that was, oh, that was just a wonderful, wonderful experience. I didn't want to come home. I just didn't want to come home. I could go to any hotel I wanted to and get a room and I could ask for service. Nothing in my life had given me the idea that I couldn't ask for service or that I couldn't go wherever I wanted to, but somehow you just know that. In South Carolina I did a little of traveling. Certainly the usual thing from your house to downtown shipping and I remember once I got on the bus with some other teachers who were roommates. And I went and automatically sat in the first seat that was empty. And they came along, these Negro teachers, and gave a great whoopla, you know. "You mustn't sit

there" and all that. I didn't know what had happened. I turned around and looked at the man next to me and he looked at me. And I said, "What's the matter?" "You can't sit there. First of all it's the front of the bus, second of all you're sitting next to a white man." So I had to get up and stand in the back. And that made a great impression on me. And so, you know, going to Europe you suppose something, well, I just didn't know. I thought maybe something like that would come up. And so I was frightened. But that was a wonderful, wonderful experience at that time. The freedom, you know, you just feel free. You feel open. You feel like you can think and if you like you can be, not necessarily be somebody, just be . . .

HG: Yourself.

VB: . . . yourself.

HG: Where will you visit in Europe this time?

VB: This time I'm going to Portugal. I'm really only going to Portugal because the plane lands there. But I'm heading for Madrid. I'm going there because, oh, that's one, my God, Goya for course. And I've wanted to see that for a very long time and I understand they have best there. So I'm going to spend, oh, maybe two weeks in Spain in Seville and go down to Madrid and Toledo. And then I'll go to Paris and spend about two and a good half weeks there. There is an etching workshop in Paris. I've written to them and they think it would be very wonderful for me to come and work in that workshop. So I think I may do that. And from there to Italy and back.

HG: How long will you stay in Italy?

VB: In Italy? It's rather open, actually.

HG: I see. How long will you be away all together?

VB: Eight weeks.

HG: Eight weeks, I see. Well, will you do some work in Italy as well?

VB: Yes, if I can tear my eyes from, you know, Florence is a gem.

HG: Yes, yes, it is. It's beautiful.

VB: But I plan to paint all along, you know, watercolor. There are some things you can get with a camera guaranteed to be beautiful but other things are not so important. And since I'm going alone and since I can just kind of mosey along, I'll just sit around and paint. It appeals to me. This will be really recording not any kind of gutsy stuff, but as I remember it the color is so different there and I expect in Spain the colors very unusual. So that I want really to record all of that. I think that my painting needs now to get, to again incorporate some environments. Not necessarily a particular location but environmental ideas. So I want to get as much as possible here and there.

HG: Tell me. If you had the opportunity, would you prefer to live in Europe, Africa, or any other country other than your native United States?

VB: I've thought of living in Europe, but now I don't think so. I don't think I would prefer, you know, to live any other place.

HG: Why not?

VB: Because I want to be more a part of this country. I don't feel part of it yet, but I want to work at that. And this year leaving at this time is a little difficult because I think this is an important time to be here. I'll be concerned about it, you know, all summer. It's important to be in New York and to be, well, to be in this country. Not necessarily New York.

HG: Tell me. Do you have any political affiliations?

VB: I'm a registered Democrat and I'm not very political-minded.

HG: You must have feelings about the political situation in this country.

VB: Oh, yes. I think it's dreadful. I think it's just terrible. I don't know what to do about the coming election. I feel pretty horrible about Nixon and Humphrey, and questionable about McCarthy. I felt the same way about Kennedy. I didn't think there's anyone that one can be definite about. There isn't ever anyone you can be certain about. But anyone that you can . . . Well, if I were a campaigning type . . . Once I campaigned for Stevenson. And I felt that very strongly. There isn't anyone now that I could do that for. There doesn't seem to be any hope.

And, you know, it really doesn't seem as if anyone is telling the truth. When you consider the office of president, you know, the first thing I can say is, "How can anybody want to do that? How can anyone actively campaign to put himself in such a position?" And after considering that question there must be something in that man, you know, that's a little bit Napoleonic or hypo-egocentric searching and needing power to want to do that. So how can you believe them? Anyone who would do that would do lots of things for power, you know. But then, again, if you have that attitude then there isn't any faith in the political system at all. When I say how can you believe in a political system at all, it seems that it is necessary to believe in a political system so that you can live in a place. But I don't think that we really are living in this place. It's very hard to have any say in what happens to you. The government is supposed to listen to public opinion but they listen to what they want to hear really. Well, it's very unusual that we have many people who are fighting against poverty, for instance, and we have the wealthiest country in the world. And yet all those people went to Washington and then they were thrown out. Some people say that if Martin Luther King were there then it would have been a better protest. Maybe that's so, I don't know. But he wasn't there and nobody's doing anything about his not being able to be there. It's really very difficult to talk about Martin Luther King because its I think that one has to be now a little bit more objective about it, but I find it very difficult to do that. It's a terrible, terrible thing. Somebody asked me the other day what do I remember that day when Martin Luther King was assassinated. And, you know, I still can't really talk about it clearly. But she asked me because she's a teacher and she is a white teacher teaching out on the Island. She went to school that day because she gets up so early she didn't hear the reports. She said it was really the worst day that she ever had and she wouldn't have gone had she known about this. But the people in her school were frightened. And do you know what they were afraid that every single Negro would come and take their televisions sets and their cars and their homes and demolish their things. I was horrified because I never thought . . . you know, all those things that white people have said about Martin Luther King's assassination that somehow never occurred to me that they would have active fear. They were barricading their homes and all of those who had guns were getting them out, that very day. And I asked her, I simply said, had it ever occurred to them that those Negroes, those same Negroes they thought were going to come and take their things away from them were busily being grieved by the death of Martin Luther King, and so they really didn't have a thought for all these white people who were sitting in their homes all closed up and barricaded. Well, she really couldn't answer that. Because it certainly had never occurred to them. I think that the fact of grief occurred to me but I think that certainly I felt much more again for this country because that was permitted to happen and I don't think that one crazy man did it. I think it was quite a little syndicate there had arranged for him to be killed. I don't for a moment think that this was just one crazy guy who happened to get a gun. And the very fact that he's there in England and they are finding it very difficult to get him back to this country is another little thing that even helps me think he's being protected and he's being helped. Certainly he has a very clever lawyer, but there are people who are very powerful in this country politically, economically, who are busily getting rid of powerful Negroes. People who seems to be fearless, you know, with Medgar Evers and all. You know, if we can have a political system that can condone and can arrange for such things, and I do not question that for a moment that this is part of a political thing, then you know really what is there to hope for in elections? You ask about political affiliation, I don't suppose one should withdraw from it. Whenever and wherever it's possible to voice any of these things, then one certainly should. But it doesn't mean that you have to have faith and believe because it just doesn't seem to happen.

HG: We've talked about your work, your travels and a great amount of things. Let's talk about your hobbies. Do you have any?

VB: Yes, I read mystery stories. That's one. And one of my hobbies is dancing. I take a, I haven't this year, but I have for a long time taken a dance class -- modern. I wanted to be a dancer once. I know I kind of got started with it late but I really love that. And then there are . . . there isn't much time for hobbies, you know.

HG: What about marriage?

VB: What about it? [Laughing]

HG: You're not married, are you?

VB: No, I'm not, and I haven't been.

HG: What do you think about the institution of marriage?

VB: Oh, I think that there are very, very close relationships formed in marriage. And it must be a lively thing. But that's not really true. There was a time when I was growing up when I said I would never get married. I said that because my mother and father always had a very unhappy marriage and I watched it be unhappier and unhappier. I watched my mother take care of four girls alone and when I came to realize that that's what she was doing, I said it'll never happen to me, boy. You'll never get me in such a mess. Oh no. So I was kind of against the whole idea for a very long time and consciously I said that's not something that I should do. But subconsciously I was very much afraid of it. It's not easy to take care of four girls. I was engaged a couple of

times and that didn't happen. So, I still think it's a very nice institution for those people who can do that.

HG: Why don't we go on to the involvement of your work. Why don't you just talk, you know, very freely about your involvement with your work. What you hope to accomplish through your work?

VB: Well, when I first began painting I painted because I liked the activity. I liked looking at things and trying to get them down on canvas. I always painted from something, either a posed model or a still-life or little landscape. And it was just the pleasure of feeling and working with the paint and the color. I always used very vivid colors, one next to the other. And the whole lushness of it. I also liked texture very much and the juxtaposition of texture and smoothnesses and that sort of thing. Then as it went along it began to feel a little more about people and I got into knowing that I could see into people, that I could get what I saw down which was very often not what other people saw. And it's rather incisive and so I really wanted to do that and I've wanted to do more and more of that. It took the form of portraiture but I couldn't stop with that because portraiture is not enough. Then I went to California. Having been so involved with painting people, I wanted to paint landscapes to get more of the natural thing. And in the city, of course, that was rather difficult so there was a tremendous opportunity there. We were in a wonderful, wonderful canyon with imported tropical foliage, and I began to construct my paintings and began to select. Coming back to New York the landscape was still there but it was tempered by the complexity of New York. And there were people again. And so I vacillated between people and landscape and then began to try to bring it together. And what I was trying to do with all of this was maybe to capture a life idea. People don't live in boxes and if they do, they, to me, shouldn't. People walk around in the city and they never look up. And there really isn't a sky. But there so often is much life in the city; there's so much going on. But it can't be isolated to bodies and people and boxes and concrete and buildings. So I wanted to get the things that we see and the other things that are together. I thought I wanted to do that. Then I came to a period when I couldn't paint at all, and I really think that that period was very important. I just stopped dead still. I drew a little bit, and I was not working at a job. I was just trying to paint. And each day I just couldn't do it. I slept and thought about it and finally realized that with some help -- other painters were very helpful then -- that what I was trying to do was not really me. In order to get a statement of me out I had to do some very, very personal digging. Of course, as you know, everyone is reluctant to do that. After all, who wants to drag up all the mess. But the fact was I couldn't paint so I had to do that. And I began to do sketches. There were some things in my life that I had also always tried to skirt over and not make important, but they became so important that I couldn't overlook them any more. One was the fact of being a female in a male society. And the other, well several others, was my difficulty with men, beginning with my father. And this becomes very, very personal and psychological and all of that. But I think that an artist has to do that before going on to a larger and more universal statement. So that's what I did. I did sketch after sketch in oils on paper of my feelings on those subjects. And after awhile I was free somewhat from this hang-up and began painting again. And many of the thoughts I had about my father and my relationship to him, all of that came out on the canvas. And what was so gratifying about it was that it became a universal statement and not one that was totally personal. But it had to be personal first before I could see the universality of it. So now my direction is always that, that statements I make in painting must be universal. I don't know that I've reached that or passed it yet but I think it's coming. And I think that I've made a very great inroad to it.

HG: Do you want to talk about experiments with color or new materials? If any?

VB: Well, I'm not an experimenter. I think that my whole push is in saying what there is to say. And if I need to find a very new way then there's an experience to have but not in terms of the new materials or the new techniques or anything like that. If I find a need for it then, yes. For instance, I have been painting in oils all this time. I tried acrylics once and I found I didn't like them and didn't pursue it. They didn't do what I needed done in painting. And oils do. I try different media. Now I'm using an egg tempera and that really seems to work very nicely. As far as color is concerned, my color has moved from strong contrast of rich color to more tints. And I did that rather purposely because it seemed the subject matter was rather strong and I thought that both strong color and strong subject matter was redundant. But now I'm getting back to stronger color and more form because the stronger the statement I think the better it is. I don't feel the need to temper it anymore.

HG: Have you shown your work in New York or anyplace in this country?

VB: Yes. I've shown in Atlanta for several years. And the Harlem Cultural Council had a show in Harlem. I showed there. And in the gallery Fifty-seventh Street and group shows in Long Island, several. And, oh, yes, Massachusetts. I showed there. I think that's it as far as I can remember. Oh, also in California.

HG: Have you ever one any prizes as a painter?

VB: I won an achievement award. They called it "for outstanding achievement in the arts." that's given by the National Council of Negro Women.

HG: What are your plans for the future as an artist? Do you want to tell me about it?

VB: I have one big plan and that is to get into a gallery, a gallery stable. And to become known as an artist. And not female and not anything else, you see, an artist. Or I would say and artist who is black. I want to continue to work in this medium, in oils, and also to explore more the etching media and to get more involved with graphics. Because I think there is a wide range of possibilities in graphics. But mainly I want to do work and to see and to reveal. I would like to establish an audience, an audience that can really see what I'm doing. I would also like to teach in a college because I think that teaching continues to stimulate my work, sharing with students and having a reciprocal kind of thing with them. So, whatever it is that I learn in my work will be given to them. In doing that I would like to do it in a Negro college or university because I think that's where it would be used most. And I think that so many artists are lost there. And they have more to say at the moment than any other group in this country. I think that painting is really I have now known that it's part of me and something that I must do. So whatever it is and wherever it goes it is something that I will always do and I'll always continue to find the best expression of the ideas that I do have about people and humanity.

HG: Thank you Miss Browne.

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