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Oral history interview with Bernarda Bryson
Shahn, 1983 April 29

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Bernarda Bryson Shahn on April 29, 1983. The interview was conducted at Bernarda Bryson Shahn's home in Roosevelt, New Jersey by Liza Kirwin for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

LIZA KIRWIN: Mrs. Shahn, could you begin by talking about your family background.

BERNARDA SHAHN: Well, my mother was a Latin professor in the university; and my father was a newspaper editor and owner. Later in his life he was very involved in politics. Both my parents were politically liberal. My family was always academic. My grandfather and his brother started their own coeducational college in Ohio before my mother was born, and my mother grew up in that kind of an atmosphere. I grew up in a very academic atmosphere. I lived in the country part of my life - went to school until I was nine - and then my parents decided to go West. We went West and I did not go back to school again until I was ready to go to high school. My mother had - she had taken out some sort of teaching certificate that would enable her to be our teacher. Because being a college professor, of course she was very well qualified to teach us, except that she didn't really [laugh] bother very much about it. When I went to high school I had to tutor in everything except Latin, so I used to make my way in other studies by doing everybody else's Latin for them and also English, which was very easy for me. I went to the Columbus School for girls, which was a very tough boarding school, and got considerable academic discipline there; it was a marvelous place. I went to Ohio University, from which both my parents had been graduated and a lot of other members of my family. After I left, during my senior year I transferred to Ohio State University, which I considered a mistake; but that's beside the point. I went to the Cleveland School of Art for a while, and then I went to - At Ohio University I took both art and art history and we had quite intensive art history courses in the Columbus School for girls. I took etching and lithography, etching mostly, at something called the John Huntington School. That was after I had my first job. A friend of mine was a very fine lithographer, and so I learned lithography with him.

LIZA KIRWIN: Where were you working then?

BERNARDA SHAHN: I was working - The first job that I had after I got out of school - I was married; my first marriage was when I was a senior in college. That didn't last very long. My first job was with a department store drawing fashions and things of that sort. Not so much fashions as what they called "institutional drawings" - all kinds of things having to do with their business. I did a lot of commercial drawings, sometimes freelance and sometimes not. I had quite a few jobs of that kind. Do you want me to go through all this?

LIZA KIRWIN: Yes.

BERNARDA SHAHN: I went back to Columbus where my parents were living, and I got a job on the *Ohio State Journal* writing the art column and all the art news. I had, I think, two columns and the news that came along about art. I taught in the museum school. I taught etching and lithography in the museum school.

LIZA KIRWIN: What year was this?

BERNARDA SHAHN: That was thirty-one, thirty-two - around that time. I had a wonderful brush with the head of the Columbus Museum. I had written something rather smart aleck about *Whistler's Mother* being [laugh] brought to Columbus when all the artists were really on their ear and nearly starving and so on. He called me in and he told me that if I felt that I could not write complimentary things about what went on in the museum, he felt that I should not teach in the [laugh] museum school. I told him that if he felt that I was incompetent to teach etching and lithography, I felt that he should fire me. But if he fired me for what I wrote for the *Ohio State Journal* I would feel it necessary for me to mention it, which rather horrified him. I went back to the newspaper, and my editor was absolutely delighted. He called me [laugh] down and he said, "I never had so much fun with an art column." [laugh] He said to me, "You know, the head of the museum (whose name I will not mention) called and asked me to fire you." [laugh] He said something else also smart aleck. I had a very good time working on that newspaper. My father had been a newspaperman. It was very natural to me and I enjoyed it very much. About that time, the big hullabaloo in Rockefeller Center took place. One of the shows that came through the museum had a painting of Ben's - the one of -Sacco and Vanzetti handcuffed together. I was very excited about that because I was familiar with what the socially aware artists were doing, but I always felt that it was too much politics and no art. So I was very excited about Ben's work when I saw it because I felt that this was somebody who's primarily an artist and yet he has something very intensely feeling to say. I wrote at length about Ben, never having met him or anything of the sort. Then this Rockefeller Center business happened. I

asked my editor why I shouldn't go over to New York and interview [Diego] Rivera. He said he thought that was a fine idea, so I went. When I was talking to Rivera, he introduced me to Ben, who was working with him. I thought that was very interesting. I told him that I had written about him and so on and so forth. Then I went back to Columbus and forgot all about it.

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you actually go to the show of the Downtown Gallery of the Sacco and Vanzetti series?

BERNARDA SHAHN: No, no, that was over by this time – I think that show was in '32. Well, this was probably in 'thirty-two; but this was just one picture in a large show of – I remember Kuniyoshi was in the show and Leonid, the brother of Eugene Berman. It was a very varied kind of show. I decided I would go to New York because I found it very very interesting – that period when I was there. When I went to interview Rivera, he was already working at the New Workers School on Fourteenth Street on the panels that he did for them. That's where I met Ben, who was working with him. I decided it would be fun to go to New York to live and I told my editor that I was going to leave. This was the biggest mistake of my life. He said, "Why don't you stay here and let me make a first rate reporter of you?" I thought that was very complimentary, but I had decided that I would go to New York. I've always been kind of sorry that I didn't stay because I love newspapers; I really like working on them.

LIZA KIRWIN: When you were deciding to go to New York was it to pursue a career in journalism or in art?

BERNARDA SHAHN: What I was going to do – Horace Kallen was teaching a course, which I think he called the sociology of art, or something of that sort; it sounded rather interesting, at the New School for Social Research. So what I was going to do – I had it all planned out. I was going to go to New York and take this course with Horace Kallen. I thought I would write for *The New Republic* if they would permit it. My family had always been big *New Republic* subscribers. But when I got there, Horace Kallen was in Europe and wasn't teaching the course. The first night I was in New York I went down to a meeting – at the Church of All Nations of The Unemployed Artists Association – and before I had left, as I told you, I had become the secretary of the organization. That was very consuming, to put it mildly, and very interesting.

LIZA KIRWIN: Who took you to the meeting?

BERNARDA SHAHN: Oh, who did? I don't even remember.

LIZA KIRWIN: It was your first night in New York City.

BERNARDA SHAHN: It isn't that I hadn't been in New York before.

LIZA KIRWIN: But you had just arrived.

BERNARDA SHAHN: Let me see, I wonder who did take me there? It wasn't anybody that I can think of. I was staying with a friend of mine, who was a McFadden editor at that time – a Russian girl named Lucy Tempkin. Lucy may have just told me that it was there because she would have been aware of it. She may have told me it was there – or maybe somebody – I don't know how I found out about it. I don't think I would have gone alone. I don't think I could have even found the Church of All Nations. It was before I had met [William] Zorach, I think. I went there and immediately had lots of friends. It got very, very interesting because the projects were starting in New York. The Gibson Committee had been functioning. These artists had, all of them, been employed on Gibson Committee projects. I don't know whether I should tell you a funny story or not, but I will.

LIZA KIRWIN: Go ahead.

BERNARDA SHAHN: The Gibson Committee gave them – about five or six or more, maybe twelve artists – a job redecorating Saint Mark's Church. They were going to redecorate it and paint the whole plastered part all snowy white. When they got to the ceiling, they painted an enormous red hammer and sickle on the ceiling of Saint Mark's Church, since they knew that they were going to paint it over. They painted it over, and they painted it over, and they painted it over. [laugh] Then they decided that about the fourth coat it had really been completely painted out. (I was not part of this; this happened before I went to New York.) After that they all claimed that every time they went into Saint Mark's Church they could see the red shape coming through. Seeing this thing coming through – that was a great joke that the Gibson Committee artists shared. This was the only actual project that I knew about subsidized by the Gibson Committee.

We decided to find a headquarters. We found a loft building, which we were in for a little while. I think it was on Sixteenth Street. We found another one on the corner of Seventeenth and Seventh Avenue, I think, or Seventeenth and Sixth. I'm not sure. Everybody started joining [The Unemployed Artists' Association]. We decided to become a union. We all laughed because we had nothing to bargain about at all. We just decided that it would be good to be a union. Everybody began to join. I think almost every artist in New York was a member of the union at a certain point. I stayed with it. I began to – I don't know whether I should tell you this or not because it's kind of confidential. I began to fight with the communists. I had become a communist. I began to

fight with them because I was asked not to recognize – on the floor, as the secretary of the Union – I was asked not to recognize the people who belonged to other organizations. In other words, I was supposed not to respond to certain appeals. Well, I paid no attention to it. I went ahead and I conducted the Union absolutely democratically, according to my lights. I was brought up on charges every week, constantly being brought up on charges. Fighting my way out of it – I had a very rough time. I decided I wanted to get out of it for a while. I went up to Woodstock. Bolton Brown was a very famous lithographer. I asked whether I might be able to work with him; he said that I could, at least, watch him part of the time. I took a cottage on his place on the Saugerties River and stayed there for a summer and got completely out of the Union.

LIZA KIRWIN: Was that 1933?

BERNARDA SHAHN: I think that must have been early '34; I'm not sure. I really don't remember just what year it was. It was the same year, actually, that I went to Washington. I went later in the year, I think in 'thirty-four, to Washington. I do not remember dates very well. I stayed there, in Woodstock, for the summer. I found it a very peaceful, very wonderful summer; and I enjoyed it. When I went back to New York, I decided that I was really going to stay out of that. Of course, I went back to the Union; by this time another person had become secretary of the Union, which was fine. It was being conducted in a way that I did not approve of at all. I just thought it was wrecking the Union because it was not democratic. It was awfully set up.

LIZA KIRWIN: Who were the people that were trying to control the organization?

BERNARDA SHAHN: The Communist Party.

LIZA KIRWIN: The Communist Party?

BERNARDA SHAHN: Yes, sure, and the people who represented it.

LIZA KIRWIN: Were there people, other artists, who were members of the Communist Party?

BERNARDA SHAHN: I would say there were probably thirty or forty who were, most of whom I would never mention because I think, in the first place, people did not know. Nobody knew who else was a member of the Communist Party. I was the only person I knew who entered it under my own name. They all had assumed names. I went back to the Union and I didn't like what was happening. Fortunately for me, it was at about this time that Ben called and asked me if I wanted a job in Washington. I went down there. But first when I came back to New York, I had started setting up a project under Audrey McMahan – I'm a little vague about dates on this – The thing is that I don't feel any regrets whatsoever about this kind of experience in the Union. I felt that what I did, I did very idealistically, and very legally. It was legal at that point. I think I learned a great deal. I think that you have to adhere to your principles but not necessarily adhere to the organizations that seem to embody your principles. Almost every artist who joined under the same circumstances that I did left for the same reasons that I did. Because at that point, very, very many people were very far left, as you probably have heard or know. Very few will say so today, but I, myself, don't feel ashamed; I don't feel sorry or anything of the sort. I have no compunction whatsoever about saying that; I did not consider the Union "subversive," and I don't still. I don't consider anything we did to have been illegal and it was very interesting.

When I decided that I would join the Communist Party, I joined it in Ohio. I told my mother that I was going to do that. My mother did not like the idea. She said, "You know you can do your father a great deal of damage by doing something like that." I asked my father. He said, "Nobody will do me any harm by doing what he considers to be right." He gave me a contribution. I had been working in Columbus; I had been working with groups of people who were working with people who were completely unemployed.

LIZA KIRWIN: The Unemployed Councils?

BERNARDA SHAHN: The Unemployed Councils, exactly. They were trying to help people. You can't imagine the desperation in which people were living. I think the thing that really made up my mind took place one day when I was driving my father's car out North High Street in Columbus. There was a crowd of people in front of the Columbian Building and Loan, a bank. There was a lot of excitement; people were pounding on the doors. An old man stepped of the crowd, an old gentleman, very nice looking, but very old; and he walked over to the corner. I stopped at the light and he waved me down and he asked if I were going to North Columbus. I told him yes, and he asked if he might take a ride. He told me that all his life savings were in the Columbian Building and Loan. The doors were locked; nobody had any access to his money. The old gentleman's wife was bedfast, and they were being evicted. He could not pay the mortgage on his house because he could not even get at his own savings. He was being evicted with his wife sick in bed. He told me, "Oh, just let me off on the corner of one of the streets in North Columbus." I said, "No, no, I'll take you all the way home." I took him home; he lived in such a nice house, with a garden and everything. The kind of place that people care about. This was a ghastly situation. I was very upset by it. People were being evicted. Families were being set out on the sidewalk with

their furniture, nowhere to go. Absolutely nobody making any effort of any kind to make any provision for them. This was before there were any kind of social programs at all. There had been some suggestion – As a matter of fact, Roosevelt was already President. There had been a proposal to raise a tax – I think it was called the one mill levy – in Ohio to help the unemployed. The bill had passed the legislature, and the governor had vetoed it. This was the state of politics in those days. That was very angering. When I was working on the Ohio State Journal a friend of mine named Mary Daugherty – I had two jobs; she had three jobs. One of her jobs was being a statistician for the state (she was a very brilliant girl, and was also a reporter on the Journal). Mary told me that there was a great deal of starvation in the state of Ohio, and it was being registered under all sorts of names, such as “malnutrition” and all kinds of attendant illnesses that come from starvation. Mary said, “If you’ll draw a map, I’ll do the statistics.” I made a map consisting of every county of the state, and she filled in the statistics of malnutrition and all these various diseases that come from hunger and exposure. We made this map. We tried to get our paper to publish it; they wouldn’t, although, I must say, the editor was sympathetic at least. We tried to get the *Citizen*, the Scripps paper, to publish it; they wouldn’t. We tried to get the *Columbus Dispatch* to publish it; they wouldn’t. We gave it to the Communist Party. This was the year before I went to New York.

LIZA KIRWIN: Did they publish it?

BERNARDA SHAHN: They kind of sat on it. They didn’t do anything. This was the kind of thing that was bothering all of us at that time. Everybody was so exceedingly indifferent to what was happening to people. I joined a group of college students; we called ourselves The Flying Squadron. We found that there was a law holding that if somebody is sitting on a piece of furniture, the bailiffs cannot move it. We would learn where the evictions were going to take place and The Flying Squadron went around – there were about twenty of us – and we would sit on every piece of furniture. It drove these bailiffs crazy. They would hang around and hang around [laugh] and we would sit around and sit around. Finally they would leave.

I remember one day when an old negro woman got down on her knees in the middle of the floor and asked the Lord to bless us because of what we were doing. This was all a very emotional business; it was terrible. At that time, it looked as though the only solution was a really fundamental solution. It is a little difficult to talk about this; a person doesn’t want to present it inadequately. Of all the people who have written about that period, I don’t think anyone has actually very much faced how we were affected by the simple business of seeing the agonies that people were going through. If you see a mattress and some chairs and a battered old standing lamp and pillows and so on and so forth standing on the sidewalk, and a little woman and the kids sitting there looking desolate, you can’t believe it. It just a terrible thing. Nobody was doing anything. Roosevelt then was trying to. At least our state, Ohio, was very, very reluctant to do anything.

My final leaving of the Communist group was because they were asking us to denounce Roosevelt as a trickster. They used the word “misleader” of labor. I felt and still feel – I know that Roosevelt was doing everything imaginable to try to help people; to better just those situations that were bothering us so terribly. I was devoted to Roosevelt as soon as I saw that he was not just a politician but was really doing serious things. Particularly when we were in Washington, it was so clear that the first thing in his heart, the whole first thing in his mind, was to quash the people who were indifferent to what was happening to the whole public. He was very tough about it – also humorous and wonderful. All these programs were called alphabet soup and all kinds of things like that, but it wasn’t a joke; it was very serious and very terrific. From that time on, I felt that here was the answer to what was ailing the country at that particular point. And I think that was the answer. The programs that we have now and that were born then really protect people. Even as badly as they’ve been corroded by many things, they still protect people. We have all kinds of health care; we have social security; we have so many programs. Even unions were not recognized by law in those days. If a union struck, its members could be absolutely demolished by company guards and goons and so on. People now are hardly aware of how raw the situation was with regard to civil rights in those days. People don’t know how much they owe to the whole Roosevelt administration for what was done.

Anyway, that hasn’t much to do with art (except it did). Because many people turned their art to trying to tell the story of what was going on. Some of it was cynical and some of it was real. Social comment was very popular. It was as chic to be left in those days as it was to be non-objective during the sixties and early seventies. A lot of people were social realist painters. There were two reasons for people to be social realist painters: one was – (There were actually three reasons). One was real; that they were moved by situations. I think that goes for many people, Ben [Shahn] certainly. There were other artists who painted that way because it was the thing to do. There were others who were very left politically and who were trying to paint verbal ideas, who were trying to paint doctrine. That was what, I think, gave social realism a bad name – that it wasn’t really art at all, it was just boring painting. How do you want to go on from there?

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you ever associate with the John Reed Club? Did you attend meetings?

BERNARDA SHAHN: When I first went to New York, I did. I went to the John Reed Club a few times. I joined. In fact, I did a lot of prints at the John Reed Club before I went anywhere else. I didn’t like the atmosphere of it very

much.

LIZA KIRWIN: What didn't you like about it?

BERNARDA SHAHN: I didn't like it because if anything in the world was doctrinaire – The attitude in the John Reed Club was that you really should take orders as an artist. You should do work that is dictated by Thirteenth Street, almost literally. Thirteenth Street means the Communist Party. That almost literally you were supposed to depict the causes, the chosen causes – you know, “free the Scottsboro boys” or “defend the Soviet Union.” This has nothing to do with art; nobody felt it, anyway. The John Reed Club was much more captive, so to speak, than the Artists' Union. The Artists' Union was infiltrated by that kind of thing, but the John Reed Club was totally that kind of thing. The Union had all kinds of people in it. It had people from other unions. The whole stone cutters union people were there. A lot of very conservative sculptors were part of the Artists' Union. Most of the important painters in New York belonged to the Union.

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you ever exhibit at any John Reed Club exhibitions?

BERNARDA SHAHN: No. I don't think I ever did. I don't even think Ben did.

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you exhibit at the ACA Gallery?

BERNARDA SHAHN: No, I never exhibited at the ACA. I have many friends who exhibited at the ACA. Incidentally, the ACA Gallery was phenomenal in a certain sense. That is, that Herman Baron, who ran the ACA Gallery – it was a cooperative gallery – This man and his wife were such gentle, such utterly angelic people. To them the Soviet Union was God. They treated it exactly that way. They were so kind. If you went in and you had a torn glove, Mrs. Baron would take it off and sew up the finger for you. If you had a hem falling out, she would take your skirt and fix the hem for you. They always wanted to make sure that you had something to eat. I didn't even belong to the Gallery, but I used to go there a lot. They were just the kindest people in the world. Whatever art they fostered, they did through sheer love. They were dear, dear sweet people. Maybe they were a little misguided, but they were beautiful. I don't know what people say about them because I don't follow those things. How did you find out about – What did you find out about –

LIZA KIRWIN: I knew that John Reed Club artists exhibited at the ACA Gallery.

BERNARDA SHAHN: Oh, did they really? I thought they exhibited at the John Reed Club on Sixth Avenue.

LIZA KIRWIN: They did, but there were other exhibits sponsored by them.

BERNARDA SHAHN: I think there were other artists at the ACA Gallery. I believe there were artists at the ACA Gallery who were not members of the John Reed Club. I'm pretty sure there were. I'm not sure – I think that [Robert] Gwathmey used to exhibit there. I don't think he was ever a member of the John Reed Club. Quite a few artists who exhibited there – Philip Evergood was a member of the Union. I don't believe he was a member of the John Reed Club, either. It was a very small group and very, very much into the Party. I won't mention the names of the people.

LIZA KIRWIN: Some of the people that made up the executive board or some of the leaders of the early Unemployed Artists' Group are associated with the John Reed Club.

BERNARDA SHAHN: Oh, I'm quite sure. Oh, of course. No doubt about it.

LIZA KIRWIN: Philip Bard, Max Spivak, Michael Loew. I don't know about Ibram Lassaw, whether he was or not.

BERNARDA SHAHN: About who?

LIZA KIRWIN: Ibram Lassaw.

BERNARDA SHAHN: Ibram [Lassaw] was in the Unemployed Artists' Group. I don't think Ibram was ever in the John Reed Club. He was too free wheeling a person. Max Spivak and Phil Bard were. Hugo Gellert and a fellow named Sanderson. A wonderful little Japanese artist named Hideo Noda. And then there were a lot of writers. You know the joke about the John Reed Club? If you could sign your name, you were a writer; otherwise you were an artist. A lot of people made fun of it. I went up there a lot when I first went to New York because I used their press. I didn't like it very much. I don't think I ever belonged to it; I doubt it.

LIZA KIRWIN: If these artists did come out of the John Reed Club, why did they feel it necessary to set up a group separate from the John Reed Club?

BERNARDA SHAHN: Oh, they didn't set up the John Reed Club. They didn't set up the Artist Union. Did you have the impression that they set it up?

LIZA KIRWIN: I had the impression that some of the people that were the founders or originators of this group did come out of the John Reed Club.

BERNARDA SHAHN: A few, a few. As I recall. But it was Mike Loew who first – on that first evening insisted that I be the secretary of the Union. I doubt that Mike belonged to the John Reed Club. Did he?

LIZA KIRWIN: I don't know.

BERNARDA SHAHN: Max did, I know. I'm pretty sure he did. Paul Bard definitely did. There were a lot of other people whose names I've forgotten now. The Union was a different group of people; it really was. The Unemployed Artists' Association was people who really came out of the Gibson Committee, not out of the John Reed Club. I mean out of the artists of the Gibson Committee. It was even a different point of view. While they [the John Reed Club] tried to dominate the Union, they couldn't really. There were too many diverse elements. I don't think you've ever heard the word "Lovestonite," have you? Communism was very, very funny in New York; don't forget that. It had so many splinter groups; if there were two people, there were two organizations almost. There was a fellow named Jay Lovestone who had written – I think he had written a book about Trotsky. He was a persona non grata with the Communists. He started the group called the Lovestonites. They were very, very anti full-blown Communist; they were another type of Communist. There were two or three groups of Socialists. There were Trotskyites, who were a form of Communism too – that was people like Sidney Hook. Well, it isn't necessary to go into all that. There were all these incredible numbers of splinter groups. It was all pretty silly, the whole business. What it turned out to be – it was a little bit like cultism is today, a little bit. The doctrine was so unassailable; nobody dared have a free opinion about anything. When I left it, I said, "If I got into this thing, it was in the name of freedom of conscience. I'll be damned if I'm going to give my freedom of conscience up, just to be accepted into such an organization." It was very, very interesting. I don't think I'm answering the questions you're – Is this the kind of thing you want me to talk about?

LIZA KIRWIN: Yes, I did have the impression that the nucleus of the Artists' Union came out of the John Reed Club.

BERNARDA SHAHN: No, I would really say not. There is no doubt but that a lot of people in the early Artists' Union unquestionably came from the John Reed Club. The same group also represented the Party. They were much more interested in getting orders directly from Thirteenth Street than they were in getting orders from the Union. The John Reed Club was only an obedient group; they were not a policy forming group. Those of us who fought the Party, while staying with it, had a terrifically hard fight. We didn't know – hadn't come yet to know the kind of organization, the degree of organization that was there nor the pettiness. I think most people got into it because of human sympathies. When we found out that they were really not motivated by sympathy, but by the use of people who were in trouble – As long as they could use people, to direct them toward the Communist Party, then that was the function of those organizations – the use of people, not trying to help them at all. Not at all. The theory was that communism would ultimately help them. I don't think it has, judging by what we see.

LIZA KIRWIN: As secretary of the Unemployed Artists group, what was your role? What did you actually do for the group?

BERNARDA SHAHN: I made speeches. [laugh]

LIZA KIRWIN: How often did you make speeches?

BERNARDA SHAHN: About three times a week. We demonstrated a lot. [laugh] I was talking to Lloyd Goodrich not very long ago, whom I adore. He was the Whitney representative of the PWAP Program. Lloyd told me, and I was shocked, we all of us thought that – Everybody said that Lloyd Goodrich is one person who is utterly incorruptible. I don't know a single person who didn't feel that way about him, just think the world of him. He told me that he was terrified of me, of all of us. I felt sad about that; we had only the warmest kind of feelings about him; also Harry Knight, who was a noble, wonderful fellow. The people in the PWAP were superb. Ned Bruce was a marvelous man. Ed Rowan, who was functioning – Ned Bruce was the head of the Treasury Art Projects; but Ed Rowan was the functioning head, in a sense. Ed Rowan would just stop anything and do anything for anyone, just a totally kind man.

LIZA KIRWIN: What was your impression of Juliana Force as the chairman of the PWAP in New York City?

BERNARDA SHAHN: The rivalry between Juliana and Audrey McMahan was [laugh] really acid. Once when we had some kind of a demonstration at the College Art Association, three of us went in as representatives to talk to Mrs. McMahan. She told us that she would not blame us if we were to put a brick through the window of the Whitney, which shocked us [laugh] – which shocked us to death because not one of us had the slightest notion of doing anything like that. Everybody wanted to have pictures in the Whitney, probably. Juliana was, socially, very ambitious. She had been Gertrude Vanderbilt's secretary, if I'm not mistaken. She was very thrilled by the artists who were highly successful. The only reason I got on the PWAP was because she was so impressed with Willy

Zorach. She would do as he said. I went to one meeting – When I first knew Ben, I went to a Whitney opening with him. Mrs. Force drew him, almost physically, of the melee of people into their private quarters for drinks or coffee of whatever they had. I didn't like her. I thought she was cold, ambitious, ruthless.

LIZA KIRWIN: You did have some arguments with her over the PWAP when you marched on the Whitney.

BERNARDA SHAHN: I wouldn't call it arguments.

LIZA KIRWIN: Were you representing the organization?

BERNARDA SHAHN: The way these things worked was that we would organize a demonstration, and then the police would come and try to divert us from being in front of the Whitney or whatever. Then the Whitney would ask a representation of the artists to come in and talk. I would usually be one of three who would go in and talk to Mrs. Force. I don't mean that she was mean or anything of that sort, but she wasn't very much interested in us. There were some very good artists among us. Maybe it was just that I didn't react very pleasantly to her. I don't like Mrs. McMahan either. Some of the other people around them I liked very much. The rivalry between Mrs. McMahan and Mrs. Force was very warm.

Another thing that I used to do which was very funny – You know that I had worked on a newspaper and my father was a newspaperman; all my friends, too. I knew newspapers and their ways very, very well. When we were going to have a demonstration, I knew perfectly well that the *Times* and the *Tribune* did not know the names of their reporters, so I would call the *Tribune* and say, "This is Bernarda Bryson speaking; I'm down on Eighth Street. There is a very large demonstration of artists down here. I suggest that you send a photographer." They would ask me for all the details – you know I had called in stories too much before. I knew how to call in a story. They would take the story, and they always ran it. They often sent a photographer; and they always ran the story, [chuckle] which was very, very funny. You know, we were having a very good time, I must say too, doing all that.

I shouldn't in a way talk about all this. I feel a little regretful after I talk, in a sense, publicly about those days. Now there is such a fear-of-the-devil kind of atmosphere that surrounds the very word "communism." A person can hardly speak of it without being misunderstood or his motives questioned or his whole way of living questioned. There were very terrific people who belonged to the party. Most of them, during the McCarthy period, just denied any association whatsoever. Very few people had felt that they should say that they were ever members of the party. I don't see any reason why they should or shouldn't. It didn't make any difference to me. I think what you really wanted to know was to what degree the party did control the Artists' Union. I would say it did not. I would say that it tried very, very hard. It did not. We started the magazine *Art Front*. Every week, month or however often we put it out, we fought Thirteenth Street, I cannot tell you, to keep their stuff out of the paper. We didn't always succeed, but the degree to which we succeeded was remarkable.

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you write for *Art Front*?

BERNARDA SHAHN: Yes, sure. I really – Ben and I did most of the editing. That's when I first really got very close to Ben. When we decided to start *Art Front*, I asked Ben, [Yasuo] Kuniyoshi, and Stuart Davis and I forget how many people – I asked about six artists – whether they would be on the editorial board and they all said yes. Stuart and Ben both worked on it; most other people didn't. Max Spivak and I did a great deal of the work. Since I had had a great deal of newspaper experience, I did quite a lot of the side writing, small writing, and the layout Ben and I did. I did a great deal of the – First I did almost all of it. Then everybody worked on it. We had people in the Union who wrote very, very well too.

LIZA KIRWIN: Whose idea was it to put out *Art Front*?

[End of Tape 1 – Side 1]

BERNARDA SHAHN: I think you might say that it was one of those ideas that just emerged by itself, because it was so obviously a desirable thing to do. What we wanted was literally a voice, a medium to say what we were standing for and what we wanted, and we did pretty well. I notice that it's quite a collector's piece now.

LIZA KIRWIN: Yes it is.

BERNARDA SHAHN: What I wanted to say is that at the time I left I wasn't the only person who left. A lot of other people did and at that point, I might add, the turnover was enormous in the Communist Party, not just among artists but among intellectual people, generally speaking, who had been, I won't say seduced, but who had been attracted by the idea of a philosophy that addresses itself to the poor and the handicapped. I think that's what attracted people. I think when they found that that was really not the basic motive, it repelled them. The turnover was enormous, always. When I came back to New York, the person who became the secretary of the Artists' Union – (I will not mention the name) – was a person who was, apparently, quite owned by the party, and

was really a mouthpiece. I should have been, so far as they were concerned; but I was just too stubborn to be. *Art Front* stopped being the great big thing that we put out, sort of a tabloid style; that was Stuart Davis's idea that it should be a tabloid. It became a smaller thing; at that point it became an entirely different kind of paper. It did continue to publish it for a while. I didn't follow it. I got pretty bored with reading it. I didn't like the -

LIZA KIRWIN: When did you leave *Art Front*?

BERNARDA SHAHN: I left *Art Front* at the time I left the Communist Party. That was when I went to Woodstock. That must have been early 'thirty-four. It couldn't have been too early, because I went up there for the summer and I just don't remember the dates. If I looked at *Art Front* I guess I could figure the dates. The big *Art Front* stopped publishing very soon after that.

LIZA KIRWIN: I think that must have been 'thirty-five. *Art Front* began in the summer of 'thirty-four.

BERNARDA SHAHN: Oh, it did. It was that summer then. I must have left in 'thirty-five. I thought I went to Washington in 'thirty-four; I guess I went in 'thirty-five. I went to Woodstock and then came back. When did *Art Front* start?

LIZA KIRWIN: It was about May of nineteen thirty-four, the spring or early summer.

BERNARDA SHAHN: I think that's right. I think that the dates are all a little bit later than I had thought. I was still in Columbus in 'thirty-one, two and three. Roosevelt was President before I left Columbus.

Another thing that happened that changed the whole mood, the whole face of the Artists' Union, the Artists' Congress began. Stuart Davis was one of the prime movers of the Artists' Congress. The reason he wanted to start an Artists' Congress was because he felt the Artists' Union took in every Tom, Dick and Harry, which it did. That was our purpose and our principle. Anybody whose primary interest or work in his life was being an artist - There was no criticism whatsoever of the kind of work or the style or the aesthetic or anything of the sort. It was just, "Are you an artist? Then you're eligible to be in the Union." Stuart wanted an organization of "artists of standing." That would mainly be gallery artists. I opposed it very hard because I thought it would wreck the Union. I think he wanted to get out from under the pressure that we had all been under. The Artists' Congress had no pressure. It had some but not very much. The Artists' Congress really took the heart out of the Union, in a certain sense, because the really hard working artist, the really dedicated artist, all went into the Congress. That's when Ben went to Washington, and I got a job in Washington. That was really the end of the Union as being the all-artists association. I know that Kuniyoshi went to the Congress. That didn't mean that they left the Union, but it meant that their interest in the Union declined. I don't think that Reggie Marsh was ever a member of the Union, although he was around some, but he was part of the Congress. I don't really know what other artists went into it. It was a very brief, very intense period.

[Interruption]

What I wanted to say was this, that what happened to all that extreme leftism of that period was the New Deal. Roosevelt did all the things to alleviate the situation that everybody was so concerned with. I have an undying loyalty to Roosevelt. He was so humanistic a man, so highly educated; and he spoke so beautifully. In the Communist Party I never found anyone in the leadership who seemed to be motivated by idealism. Everything was so full of conniving. There was so much treachery, and there was also a great deal of personal ambition. You wouldn't believe that ambition could exist on such a scale. There was fantastic competition among people to emerge within the Party itself. There were many people also who joined the Party seeking somehow an emotional home. The Party put out its arms to them and gave them a sense of belonging somewhere, of belonging to something. These are people who were really disinherited. They suddenly found companionship, purpose, a function in life. It's one of the things that scares me about the situation now. I think there are so many young people who have no destination in life; whether it is communism or fascism, they are right now so susceptible to any kind of spellbinder. All the cult business is a manifestation of that. Some really big, Hitler-type spellbinder could be so dangerous today. Kids don't have any destination in this world at all. They don't have anything they can accomplish, or want to. (People like you have education, background and perspective.) The more I see what happens - crime, violence - is kids that have no parents but television, who have no function or role in this world at all. It really scares me to see that. In those days it was another time of people who were disinherited. That's what Roosevelt meant when he talked about the forgotten man. He provided for human beings something they could really believe in. He was not deceiving anybody. He was an ace politician, but an ace politician primarily in the interest of statesmanship - a philosophical humanist and so on.

When we first went to Washington, quite a lot of people were very left. The things that we were doing in the New Deal - The things that we were doing were so exciting; they were inspiring, meaningful. It was probably the most thrilling time that I've ever gone through. We had a place in Rosslyn [Virginia]; it was the last house on that big bank that goes up from the river. We would sit on our balcony at night with all the lights of Washington spread out below us. Roy Stryker and Adrian Dornbush, all these people who were heads of departments, would come

over. We'd sit on our balcony and drink beer or coffee or something. We realized that what we said there was going to affect people in Wisconsin, in Georgia, in Maine - it's an exciting thing. I made a poster. I think I made only one poster, although I did an awful lot of lithographs. I realized that this poster - just this little thing that I did in a room - goes there and there and there. It announced that this administration would provide a mule, a plow, fertilizer, seed for people. This was making life for people. That was what, to me, life was all about in those days.

LIZA KIRWIN: Could you talk a little bit about the lithography works that you set up in Washington.

BERNARDA SHAHN: We were working under [Rexford] Tugwell. Roosevelt had made a speech that affected me very strongly. The speech was about frontiers. He talked about the decimation - not exactly the decimation, but the disappearance of the great American frontier. He said there had been a time when people could always go farther west and could always occupy unoccupied land. He said that that period has almost passed, so we have to forge a new social frontier. He said that the new frontier is going to be within what we can do with each other. I found it very exciting. I told Adrian Dornbush, who was the head of our department that I wanted to do a series of lithographs based on Roosevelt's speech. He thought that was a great idea. I did a number of them. I can show you a couple of them if you like. I did a number of lithographs; I didn't finish it because - I forget which year, but it was just before Susannah was born. I stopped and Susannah was born, but I had completed many stories and prints. Then it was a long time before I did more work. I did some more work in resettlement, but not very much more. This was still the frontier. One day Tugwell came in to my shop. He had been in the northwest; I think he had been at the University of Wisconsin for a while. I'm not sure about that. He had a sort of Veblenesque background. He came in. He looked at my lithographs and he said, "This is what [Thorstein] Veblen was all about." I found that very vindicating; it was just what I had hoped I could convey. It was an exhilarating time. When I was in New York, most of the lithographs that I did there were of a satirical nature - many of them being satirical of the Communist Party, too. I remember one that I called Union Square of three intellectuals in black hats and briefcases walking, the famous Union Square statue behind them. One was called *The Lovestonite* a print of two men sitting in Stewart's Cafeteria - where everybody hung out in those days - two men sitting in Stewart's Cafeteria looking at each other like this, with suspicious eyes. Behind them a lone man walks with a tray; he is the Lovestonite. [laugh] I did a series on the individual entrepreneurs of Fourteenth Street, people who demonstrated corn plasters, and people who demonstrated all kinds of things; I did a lot of those.

LIZA KIRWIN: Were those lithographs done while you were on the PWAFF?

BERNARDA SHAHN: Those were all PWAP, yes. The Washington ones were, of course, under the resettlement administration under Dr. Tugwell.

Ben and I came up here [Roosevelt, New Jersey] to do the mural. Alfred Kastner was very excited about this town which he was still designing at that point. He said to Ben, "This will be the first time the architect and the artist have worked together on something." He really built - It was going to be a community building. It's really the school. He built the school, the whole lobby area, around the mural, which was nice. We stayed here and worked on that. Then we went to Ohio and Jonathan was born. Ben did more photographs. Then we came back -

LIZA KIRWIN: That was 'thirty-eight?

BERNARDA SHAHN: In 'thirty-eight. We came back to New York. Ben had won the competition for the Bronx mural, which was very exciting. I worked with him on that, too. That was done in egg tempera; we claimed that we raised the price on all the eggs in New York. [laugh]

LIZA KIRWIN: How much of a contribution did you make?

BERNARDA SHAHN: I just worked as Ben's assistant, although I must say that I was part winner of that mural. I don't know whether you ran across that or not. I thought we should either do my design or his, so I preferred to do his. I learned so much; it was wonderful working with Ben.

LIZA KIRWIN: You sent in a design that was all your own?

BERNARDA SHAHN: Yes. He sent in a design, and for some reason it was awarded to both of us. I didn't want to try to insert my designs in his whole story of what was going on. He based the Bronx mural on a Walt Whitman poem, "I Hear America Singing." It's a very beautiful mural. It was fun; I ground color and painted, you know; here I painted and there I painted.

LIZA KIRWIN: Here in Roosevelt was the first time you worked in fresco?

BERNARDA SHAHN: Worked with Ben - It's the only time I worked with - No, it's the first time I worked with fresco, yes.

LIZA KIRWIN: At the community center in Roosevelt, New Jersey?

BERNARDA SHAHN: Yes.

LIZA KIRWIN: The second time was the Bronx?

BERNARDA SHAHN: The second time was the Bronx, and that was egg tempera. The next mural that Ben did was in Washington.

LIZA KIRWIN: The social security mural?

BERNARDA SHAHN: The social security, yes. I don't remember the actual event. When we were living in New York and had been working on the – And I think we had finished the Bronx mural – I read in the newspaper a nice headline which said "Dreamtown Goes Bust." The Dreamtown that went bust was Roosevelt – was this town. It was called Jersey Homestead in those days. I got very excited. I said, "I know just the house I want; let's go out there." Ben said, "Well, I'll go on one condition – if we stay only one year, and you don't get involved." It was really great fun. Before the year was out, I was on the Board of Education and he was on the Town Council.

LIZA KIRWIN: Immediately involved.

BERNARDA SHAHN: Yes, immediately involved. It was a strange town. It was almost all foreign born; it was almost all Jewish, people from Poland or Russia. The going language was not English. I was so isolated here. It was unthinkable, but I was working.

LIZA KIRWIN: Was this when you began the illustrations for *Harpers*?

BERNARDA SHAHN: Exactly when I began. I was going to go crazy.

LIZA KIRWIN: Being here?

BERNARDA SHAHN: Yes, just being here.

LIZA KIRWIN: At that time you had three children?

BERNARDA SHAHN: By that time I had three children. Abby was born. We came out here and got the house; we didn't stay here all the time. Abby was born; the war broke out. We went straight to Washington. No, no. Ben won the Washington mural and we went down there to do the mural. The war had just broken out, though, when he started the mural. When he finished the mural, they wanted him to stay there to work with war management. He did. I forget what I did. I did some writing then, for various things. I worked with the American Labor Party in New York. I don't know what all I did. After I started working with *Harpers* I was working almost exclusively for magazines.

LIZA KIRWIN: In one letter, in the Ben Shahn papers in the archives, you write that "One works for *Harpers* for love and...."

BERNARDA SHAHN: [chuckle] How did I write that? To whom did I write that? To Ben?

LIZA KIRWIN: I'm not sure to whom the letter was written. You wrote, "One works for *Harpers* for love and not money," and if that element was absent you didn't want to do pictures for them.

BERNARDA SHAHN: This is very interesting. It was a letter from me in Ben's papers. I thought I had taken all my correspondence out of Ben's things.

LIZA KIRWIN: There was a small folder.

BERNARDA SHAHN: Russell Lyries or Eric Larraby had always been my editor. Going into *Harpers* I found that Russell was off on vacation somewhere and Eric wasn't around. I got a call from Jack Snyder, who was also editor. Jack said he had a story that he thought would interest me – would I like to do it? "Yes," I said. I went in and got the story. I did some drawings that I really liked for it. It was a story of a college fellow, of about my era – of a college fellow who came back to the college town and stood in front of the house where all of them had drunk wine and read poetry. This house had become a funeral parlor; I remember the story very well. I loved the story. I made this paunchy looking fellow, slightly bald, with his overcoat over his arm, looking at this marvelous Victorian house that was now a funeral parlor. Jack said to me, "That picture would never sell a story to me." I said, "Jack, since when are we supposed to be selling something in *Harpers*? I had a real battle with him about it. I don't know whom I wrote to.

LIZA KIRWIN: I could find out for you if you're interested.

BERNARDA SHAHN: I wrote to – When Jack wanted me to change it, I said to him, “Listen, Jack, you work for *Fortune* for money,” (and I named two or three magazines for money); “For *Harpers* you work for love.” The funny thing is that he’s the only person at *Harpers* who ever turned down a drawing of mine (at least that I can remember). I think he finally took it. Yes, he’s the only one for *Harpers*. I once had a drawing turned down by Jerome Snyder for *Sports Illustrated*. These two drawings, I remember, as being two of the nicest drawings I ever made.

LIZA KIRWIN: On what grounds were they rejected?

BERNARDA SHAHN: That they were good, I guess. I don’t know why Jerry rejected it. Jerry Snyder was a terrific artist, but he was highly stylized. Jerry wanted everybody who worked for *Sports Illustrated* to work the way he worked. I wasn’t going to do that. It was a story about an Irish pugilist. It was just a beautiful drawing. He had a cauliflower ear, a broken nose, was very tall, and was wearing a trench coat. He was standing in front of that wonderful iron gate at Victoria Station in London with his manager, a really surly looking little man. I loved the drawing. Jerry wanted me to change it. I wouldn’t change it. [chuckle] That was it. That was the chance you took in doing these things.

LIZA KIRWIN: You worked as an illustrator for about twenty years?

BERNARDA SHAHN: Yes, easily, or longer. I worked for lots of other magazines. I loved working for the *Reporter*. I did a lot for them. I worked for *Life* a couple of times. *Seventeen*, anything – Those three magazines were steady. It was most exciting to work for the *Scientific American*. With the most wonderful and unwarranted confidence, they believed in everything I did. It is a scientific magazine. I used Doctor Einstein for research; I used Doctor Laudenberg, who was the head of the math department at Princeton. Everything I did the *Scientific American* seemed to think was great. Once when I did a story for *Fortune*, I put a modern – one of those things they blow up on your arm –

LIZA KIRWIN: To measure blood pressure?

BERNARDA SHAHN: Yes. In the picture. One of the editors said that this is not what this thing looks like. I said, “This is a very modern one.” Then I said to them, “Look, if the *Scientific American* can accept my research, you can, too, can’t you?” [laugh] You know you have those fights.

LIZA KIRWIN: When did you begin writing and illustrating children’s books?

BERNARDA SHAHN: Nonny Hogrogian called me from Holt, Reinhart & Winston one day and asked me if I would do a children’s book. I thought it would be fun. No, no. The first one that I did, I did – I had a very hard time – I did something for Houghton Mifflin. I had a terrific scrap with the editor; I told him to send me back every sketch I made, everything I had done. He apologized, said he didn’t want to go that far. Oh boy, I was never going to do another children’s book. Then I worked for this delightful girl, Nonny Hogrogian, who is also an artist. I did two or three books for them. I worked for every publisher after that; did lots of books. I wrote two or three. I wrote the big book about Ben – I don’t know whether you’ve ever seen it or not – that Abrams published. I’ve written for a lot of European magazines but not for a single American one. I’ve written for *Graphis* in Switzerland; for *Le Nouvel Observateur* in France; for *Image* in London; and for the *Penrose Annual* in London. I guess that’s all. It’s not very much, but some. I was always torn between being a writer or an artist. I think one of the reasons I love to illustrate is because I like to write. When I was a kid, I was so absolutely, terrifically conscious of the illustrations in books that I read that I would sometimes put my hand over them while I read in order not to spoil the story with the illustration. Did you ever do anything like that?

LIZA KIRWIN: No I didn’t.

BERNARDA SHAHN: I never liked [Arthur] Rackham. I always thought his things were too sweet, too delicately colored. I loved Howard Pyle. I had all these great people that I really loved when I was a child.

LIZA KIRWIN: Are your illustrations mostly in pencil?

BERNARDA SHAHN: No. A few are in pencil. But I work mostly in pen and ink, which I like to work in. Pen and ink is excellent for reproduction, if used properly. It is for me. It is a very sympathetic medium.

LIZA KIRWIN: You mentioned earlier, before the interview, that you’ve gone back to painting.

BERNARDA SHAHN: Yes.

LIZA KIRWIN: Could you talk about that?

BERNARDA SHAHN: I was working on a book at the time that Ben died; and, of course, I was in a very upset state. I found that the best thing that could have happened to me was the fact that I had a deadline for this

book. When I didn't know what else to do, I went back and finished that. It kind of brought me back on my feet again. I decided that since I like to draw so much and since I had done a lot of etching and lithography and even taught it; then I had a wonderful press built. I started doing plates. I've done a great lot of etchings. One day there was a panel that Ben had mounted standing around, and I just started painting. It had been so long since I had really done any oil painting, and I've been painting absolutely steadily ever since. That happened about nineteen seventy-one or two. I've shown some in Princeton, you know - just one picture at a time - and a couple of other places. I didn't think I had enough paintings. I take a long, long time to make a painting. I try to make every painting as though it's the last one I would ever do. Maybe it is. I take a lot of time to do them. There is always what you're going to paint about and what kind of painter you're going to be. A long time ago when I was a painter, I was pretty modern. I used materials very freely.

When I was a child - I started painting when I was ten or eleven years old. My mother had done some painting, and she bought me materials. I started painting very, very early. I tried to be very meticulous. They were awful, I'm sure. I don't know where they are now.

But as for now - I didn't want to do descriptive things in a certain way. I didn't want to do things that had a message. I loved the figure and I loved all the aspects of the figure. I wanted to do figurative painting. I made a couple of small figurative paintings. The first one I did is on the wall, right behind me. I liked that. I wasn't sure that that was what I wanted to do. I started painting eggs. I painted eggs of all sizes from large ones to great, great big ones. In my studio in Maine there was somebody - I have a place in the art school in Maine. Somebody had kindly put a little Hellenistic Psyche in my studio. I could not stand the thing; the head obviously did not belong to the body. The head was worked in one way and the body was very under worked. My son-in-law was in my studio - I have a very delightful son-in-law, who also has a great sense of humor. He used to be a painter, too. I said to him, "If I have to look at that Psyche again, I'm going to go out of my mind." He said, "Why don't you throw a sheet over it?" I thought that was a good idea. I went into the house, got a sheet, and threw it over this figure and said, "Wow! What an image!" I started making paintings of this draped figure. I draped another one, put it down by this little pond in the woods. I used that for a while. I had a very fine little classic studio mannequin. I started doing very, very large pictures of the small studio mannequins. The reason I do that is that it has a sense of the figure, and yet it isn't somebody smiling. It isn't, as I said to Mrs. Gruskin, it isn't "Margery in a red hat." It doesn't have any of the local character, and yet you can get the mood of a figure. It doesn't look like it; it has a little bit - the same approach as Japanese Noh Plays. In the Noh play, even the woman is done by a man. The person wears a mask. Everything the person has to portray as an actor is expressed in the movements of the body. It goes on for hours and hours and hours. There is never any change of the expression of the face. I didn't want to do masks because that has another connotation. I didn't want to do any of those things that fall into this slot or fall into that slot of themes that have been banalized by overuse. I found in these mannequins you can even create almost a sense of tragedy, of thoughtfulness or something like that. I like working with them. I've done two or three paintings; and I'm working on one now of a single figure sitting at a table in a field, for no special reason except that it's fun to do. I find that I can do the mannequin figure without committing myself to anything the figure is really doing. It is very hard to explain. Generally speaking, a figure will be part of a scene of domesticity. Or a figure will be part of a city street group. Some of these are extremely nice, but they all fall into a slot, like - click! The image belongs to this part of art, or it belongs to that part of art; it belongs to this school, or it belongs to that school; or this aesthetic, or that. Every work we see of that type of painting has that thing of falling into a slot and clicking. I wanted to do pictures that I could devote weeks to, if necessary, and still could be interested in what I was doing.

That is what I'm doing. The images are not images that people are too particularly accustomed to. Gregorio Prestopino has a gallery in New York; he told his dealer that she ought to look at my things. She came out to Roosevelt and asked me to be in the gallery, and so I'm going to have a show - it is the first show I will have had for many, many years - in October. I always considered magazines as a gallery. I never had any problem about wanting exposure....I love doing illustrations. I'm sure some of that literary element enters into what I do, but they're never specific stories. The other thing that I always feel about painting is that you raise a question and the person who looks at it - Even while you're working on it, it's still a question. If you answer it, then everybody is through with it. It's answered. I think Ben did that, although he never said it. That's what I like to do. I love surrealist art, but to be overtly surrealist can be hackneyed. It can be such a jaded kind of thing. I love Magritte and I love Max Ernst. They're terrific and they did that; they did what they did (I don't care too much for Dali). They did what they did. It's not for me to go ahead and try to rediscover what they so beautifully explored. I have another friend - he has recently died -Domenico Gnoli, in Italy, who is a marvelous surrealist painter. He created a kind of observation - something they now are calling Italy hyporealism. He would look at something like the back of somebody's head and, in the utmost detail, paint the way the hair comes out of the neck - a little curl, maybe a hairpin hanging down or something like that. Or he would do a button or a necktie or the inside of a woman's shoe. Oh, they are just heavenly paintings (and they're very sought after). When he was first doing this kind of thing, he did one I absolutely loved. There's a chair - everybody who knows him or his mother knows this chair. The chair has a head lying in the seat, complete with necktie - with a collar and the necktie - but just the head lying in the chair. [laugh] That's very delightful. If you're going to do that, you've got to commit

yourself to it completely. You have to be constantly on the search for visual puns.

LIZA KIRWIN: That's really not what you're after.

BERNARDA SHAHN: Not really what I'm after. I like to paint and I like to - to really in a sense keep the mystery going while I'm working on something so that it won't get boring to me. It's probably boring to other people; I don't know. I'll show you some if you'd like to see them.

LIZA KIRWIN: All right.

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