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*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Robert Alan  
Bechtle, 1978 September 13-1980 February  
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Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant  
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**Contact Information**

Reference Department  
Archives of American Art  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D.C. 20560  
[www.aaa.si.edu/askus](http://www.aaa.si.edu/askus)

# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Robert Bechtle on September 13 and December 28, 1978 and February 1, 1980. The interview was conducted at Robert Bechtle's home and studio in Berkeley, California by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

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Early life, family background. First visits to museums. Draws at young age, encouraged by family. Early ambition is to be an "old master painter." Enjoys art books – first real introduction to art. Begins art school at California College of Arts and Crafts. Becomes interested in modern art.

Takes art history survey with Hamilton Wolf. Discusses importance of art history for the art studio major. General attitude of students to discredit the study of art history. Bechtle's attitude toward college – a period of perpetual change. Influence of Wolfgang Lederer, head of Design Department at Arts and Crafts, on Bechtle in terms of what the attitude of the artist should be. Artistic influences on Bechtle from other professors. Bechtle's attitude toward Richard Diebenkorn when he taught at Arts and Crafts, and Diebenkorn's influence on Bechtle.

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### PART II

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Discussion of the construction and planning of a painting from the initial photograph to the final product. Importance of the photograph as the basis for the picture.

### PART III

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Impact of family life on Bechtle as an artist. Bechtle's feelings about belonging to a movement. Other members. Friendship with Dick McLean. Pioneering exhibitions of New Realism.

Bechtle's first two-man show of realist works at the Berkely Gallery, 1965. Exhibited with Dick McLean. Feelings on having a dealer represent his work.

### FIRST SESSION

LOCATION: SUBJECT'S STUDIO, BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

DATE: SEPTEMBER 13, 1978

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Bob, what I'd like to do this morning is ask you some questions and get you to talk about your own background, your family background, growing up, early education and so forth so we'll get to know that part of you a little bit. You were born across the bay in San Francisco in 1932. What about you family? What about your grandparents?

ROBERT BECHTLE: My grandparents on both sides of the family were – came from Europe. My grandmother on my mother's side was from Sweden, my grandfather also. Then on my father's side, they came from Switzerland. So my parents were first generation Americans. I don't really know too much beyond that. It's one

of those things that you get interested in digging out of late – particularly my father’s side. I can’t really recall – I have no idea what part of Switzerland they came from. The name is German, although it’s apparently a Swiss of Bavarian spelling. On my mother’s side, her maiden name was Peterson.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: A good Scandinavian name.

ROBERT BECHTLE: A Scandinavian name, right.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Sort of like Karlstrom.

ROBERT BECHTLE: I know that my grandmother was from Uppsala, near Stockholm.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It’s a famous university town.

ROBERT BECHTLE: And we have some relatives that have had some contact with from Stockholm. I don’t know the dates of things. They came, obviously, through New York and then came on out to the West Coast. I think my grandmother on my mother’s side was working as a cook for one of the wealthier families, that was before she married my grandfather. He was also Swedish, but they met here in San Francisco.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I gather all your grandparents came to San Francisco. Is this right?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, no, I’m not sure.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: This would have been –

ROBERT BECHTLE: I’m not certain. My dad was born in Alameda, and so I’m not certain whether my grandparents on that side of the family came directly to Alameda, or whether they were in San Francisco at one time.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But in the Bay Area.

ROBERT BECHTLE: They were in the Bay Area.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That’s interesting that all your grandparents found a way from Europe into the Bay Area.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, apparently rather quickly. They apparently worked in New York for a short while.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: This must have been what – around the turn of the century?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Probably. Well, it would be earlier. My mother was born in 1906, in San Francisco shortly after the earthquake. My grandmother was – went through it, you know – and so I’m not certain how soon before that [1906] they were out here. My mother was, let’s see, she was the second oldest, I guess, in the family. Her older brother was two or three years older. He was born in San Francisco also.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You said that your paternal grandfather died earlier. Was that right?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well both.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you didn’t know them.

ROBERT BECHTLE: I didn’t know either of them. My grandfather on my mother’s side, I believe he died of blood poisoning. But my other grandfather, I really don’t know anything about him.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But you knew your grandmothers?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, right. My father’s mother lived, I guess, well into her seventies, but she was bedridden with arthritis most of the time that I knew her, which was kind of strange. There was never really an awful lot of contact and so, you know, I had much better relations with my grandmother on my mother’s side. She lived by herself in Oakland.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How did your mother and father get together? Obviously they met in San Francisco, somewhere around here, I suppose.

ROBERT BECHTLE: I’m trying to think. It seems to me that my mother said that they met when my father crashed a Swedish dance. My mother had gone through San Francisco State which at that time was a State Normal School for teachers. She had just graduated and had been teaching in a one-room school way out in the northern part of the state [Amador County]. Then she taught a second year at a small school in Tipton, down near Bakersfield which is the opposite end of the state. They got married, I guess, after that year in Tipton. At

that time school teachers weren't supposed to get married so she had to quit teaching.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Bad influence on the children?

ROBERT BECHTLE: I guess. I don't know. They had some weird things doing then, and so, she quit and they moved to set up housekeeping in San Francisco. My mother's family had moved to Oakland shortly after the earthquake, like a lot of people. My dad had been born in Alameda in the first place, so they were already on that side of the bay but when they got married they moved to the city. My mother has told me about places where they lived. It was right at the beginning of the depression, they lived in the Mission District on Delores Street. As it got further into the depression there were reasons to move frequently. When I was born, they were living on Staples Street in San Francisco, but shortly thereafter moved to Oakland. So I remember nothing of San Francisco.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It just happens to be where you were born.

ROBERT BECHTLE: I was born in St. Francis Hospital but I think I was about six months old or certainly less than a year when they moved to Oakland.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What did your father do at this time?

ROBERT BECHTLE: He was working, I'm not sure, probably for PG&E. He was an electrician. He was very good mechanically, you know, he built boats, worked on cars, and that sort of thing. He was working as an electrician before the depression but during the depression he worked at whatever would come up. He sold Hoover vacuum cleaners for a while, which was what a lot of people did. So for a period of, I guess, from 1932 - late 1932 to 1933 he was really doing odd jobs including going out PG&E general construction building power lines.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Was that his career?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes. He ended up doing that for the rest of his life. He continued with PG&E and moved up to Sacramento in 1938 or 1939 to be nearer the construction work. Then right at the beginning of the war, 1942, I guess, he got a similar kind of job with the Bureau of Electricity in Alameda which was much better because there was less need to be away from home and so we moved back to Alameda. I can remember a little of living in Oakland - that we were still there when I was around kindergarten and I can remember Sacramento pretty well, because I was going into the first grade. After that I was in Alameda until almost through art school.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How would you describe your parent's situation and background in terms of social, economic considerations, cultural interests, educational opportunities and interests?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, what would you say? I guess I'd say they were lower middle class. You know, like my mother had gone to college and she didn't have a degree since you couldn't get one at that time at a teacher's college. Her sister graduated from U.C. Berkeley. She was a teacher in high school, but neither of her brothers had college backgrounds. They both went into industry. One of them worked his way up to be machine shop foreman at the Shell chemical plant at Pittsburg (California) and the other was an officer in the accounting department of PG&E. So, you know, it was a working class background, but we were always encouraged to do what we wanted, even though there was no particular cultural background at all. My mother was vaguely interested in art. She encouraged me to think about being an artist. As far as cultural opportunities were concerned when I became aware of things most of it came from outside sources. My family was never discouraging about it even if they didn't really understand what it was all about.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did they have ambitions for you, though, in terms of going to college?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes. I had a strong sense of encouragement, both coming from my mother and from other relatives. See, the thing is, my dad died while I was still relatively young. I was in the sixth grade, I guess, when my dad died. I was twelve or thirteen, something like that.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: About eleven, probably.

ROBERT BECHTLE: So I was about the age that my son is now.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did your mother remarry?

ROBERT BECHTLE: No, she never remarried. Since she had another son who was six years younger than I she had to go back to work.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Teaching?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, she went back to teaching. She is a remarkable woman. She - it was during the war, and

they were short on teachers, so they would take them back on an emergency credential which she was able to get very easily. But since she didn't have her BA she couldn't get a permanent job so she went back to San Francisco State, in summer sessions, and got her BA. Then she got her master's degree in education and kept going back until she had accumulated enough units to where she was absolutely at the top of her pay status. When she first started teaching teachers were paid nothing. The minimum wage law in California for teachers was passed at \$1800 a year. That was about 1946.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: She had to support a family on this?

ROBERT BECHTLE: She had to support herself and two kids.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Your brother, now, was older?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Younger.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So your father had died when you were eleven. She had a real young one then.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Right. When I think of that, I wonder how she managed to get through it all.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: A little more difficult then. I gather you stayed in Alameda. So basically, your childhood memories – obviously you remember your father for a few years – so most of your childhood memories were, I imagine, then in Alameda, growing up in Alameda. Was that something of a suburban situation?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, very much so. Alameda's a funny place, if you've ever been there, since it's an island, literally an island. It's connected by bridges and a tunnel, but it really has an insular personality even though it takes just five minutes to walk across a bridge to Oakland. There's something about the islandness which to this day is part of its character. Many people I knew grew up in Alameda, moved away, and then moved back there. It has a lot of the kind of thing where there are various families which are second or third generation. Some of the kids I went to high school with are on the police force or the Board of Education over there. People – they stay there, they don't move out. They just sort of raise themselves up within Alameda's society which means buying bigger and better. There are a few sections of town where wealthier people are able to live and their ambitions are to move to that part of town. And a lot of people never escape that.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Was that your ambition at one time?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, I guess it probably was, you know, in grammar school. It's one of those things where there's the east end of town and the west end of town. The west end is the wrong side of town, it's the wrong side of the tracks. It's near the naval base and there are a lot of transient people who live there, and there's the east side which is more settled and middle class. Then there's a section in the center of Alameda where the old houses are, the big old Victorians and brown shingled places, and lots of trees. To this day it's still called the "Gold Coast" and that's where the wealthier folks live. It wasn't really till I was going to art school that I started discovering that there were other parts of the world, other parts of the Bay Area like Berkeley, and San Francisco.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, I gather you weren't taken over on the old trips, and outings to San Francisco. What was your contact with the rest of the Bay Area?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, really the only contact I had with Berkeley while I was in high school was the knowledge that that was where the university was, and Berkeley High was our big football rival. We'd wend our way over to Berkeley High, you know, for the football games, but that was it. I had no concept of what Berkeley --

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You went to Alameda High School, I guess.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, right, there was just the one high school. You know the big Friday night thing, after a dance or something, was to hop in a car and drive to one of the drive-ins in Oakland. That was our equivalent of cruising the drag. Drive round and round near a drive-in, holler at girls and so forth, waving a people that we knew.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Pretty standard.

ROBERT BECHTLE: A real American Graffiti trip, absolutely. That sort of thing. And then we got older, you know, like a junior or senior. For really special occasions, we'd go to some place like the Tonga Room at the Fairmont in San Francisco, or to Chinatown for a Chinese dinner or something like that. That was absolutely a big deal. I remember, I guess, in high school, I was starting to get interested in – well even in grammar school – in classical music. Some of us in high school would go over to San Francisco to go to the ballet. That was a big treat, you know, and we would just go there and do whatever it was that we had to do to get there – sometimes it was on the bus and the streetcar. There was no sense of really discovering the city – that really didn't happen until art

school when I had my own car.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about museums? Did you have any real exposure before art school?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Not very much.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you go over to the de Young?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, a couple of times. I remember going and seeing an Edvard Munch show – my mother took me to see that. I guess that was in high school.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Somebody else mentioned that. That must have been quite an event.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Oh, it was. I only realize now how rare it is to see Munch paintings, and to see that whole show was very special.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: This what – this must have been in the late forties?

ROBERT BECHTLE: The late forties. There was also a big show at the de Young, a show of the German collections that had been liberated by the American army from the salt mines. I didn't even know that the San Francisco Museum of Art in the Civic Center existed. I knew about the Palace, but I don't think I had ever gone out there.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's pretty far from Alameda.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Actually, it is.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It's even far now. Well, what was – at some point during these years we're discussing, I would imagine you had some interest in paintings and pictures – whether they were the oil paintings in the de Young Museum or whatever. When did you begin to develop an interest in art? How did it happen?

ROBERT BECHTLE: I think it had always been there. It was a lot being interested in drawing, anyway. I guess that's where it started. I can vaguely remember things that my mother has told me and my aunt has told me about drawing pictures of automobiles back when I was five or six, like my son does now with airplanes. It's a way that kids have, I think, of possessing things that they like since there's no way that they could actually have these things. So they draw them as a way of owning them, and they develop a kind of acute eye and observation of detail. They claim that I would draw these cars at a fairly early age where you could tell whether it was a Ford or whatever. I knew the little things that would differentiate one make or a car from another. They didn't really look like that but there was enough of an exaggeration of those particular characteristics that you could tell the difference. That was always encouraged both by parents and other relatives. They would keep saying, "Gee, I think you should be an artist." They decided what that meant. So I just always thought that was what I would be when I grew up. That is, outside of a stage that a lot of kids go through when you want to be something really romantic, like a pilot, like flying an airplane.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, being an artist is fairly romantic, don't you think?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Not when you're a kid.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, I guess not.

ROBERT BECHTLE: It's something that you have no concept of what it means. Once I got through the airplane bit, then that was a decision that just somehow – it wasn't even a decision, it was something that seemed natural.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Something underneath. That's interesting.

ROBERT BECHTLE: That's what I wanted to do. My family encouraged me, when I got out of high school to go to some place where I could get some art training.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Was the idea that you would make your living – obviously that has to be the part of it – we all have to make a living --

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, no one really knew what that meant, then.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But what I mean is that it must have been directed more toward some commercial art.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, sure, becoming an artist meant becoming an illustrator like Norman Rockwell, or --

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Work for Walt Disney or something.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes. That's kind of what was expected. Because no one at that time, especially coming from a middle class situation, thought it was possible to make a living as a painter. But I don't think the distinction was that clear cut, so when I did go to art school that was what my major was, advertising art, and I signed up for that because it seemed like a practical thing to do. But even at that stage I hadn't the vaguest idea what it meant. I didn't know the various categories that existed, the difference between say, an illustrator and a designer.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, going back just a little bit, what - did you have any kind of training in - oh, say in high school. Were you able to take any art classes?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes. Again, you know, I was encouraged to do that, by teachers and by friends.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: These were available to you, though?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes in school, you know, because they certainly encouraged me, they gave me extra time to work, a place - I used to hate physical education - terrible, my coordination is terrible. Through grammar school the low point in my life was always when we had to go out and play softball or basketball or something like that, and so luckily, I had teachers who were sympathetic and a lot of times they would give me extra time to work in the art room, making posters or doing something during PE time. I suppose that's one of those things that encouraged me in going in that direction, too, because you see, in a way I was getting paid for doing art. I was getting regard for getting out of something I didn't want to do. I guess by the time I was in high school I had started to paint. I didn't know how to do it. My mother, I think bought me one of those sets of oil colors and I had started looking at art books. The Alameda library had a fairly decent little art book collection. That was a nice discovery. I used to look through the art books, admiring all the old master paintings, and that was my ambition to be an old master.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, that's interesting, because not all - it doesn't necessarily go together: an interest in drawing and facilities and an appreciation of the old masters. Because I have a friend who went on to art school after high school and went to Art Center, as a matter of fact, of course a very good commercial art school in Los Angeles. I saw him years afterwards - by then I was studying to be an art historian - we talked and I was absolutely amazed at his lack of appreciation, almost disdain, of old masters. Old masters, as if there was a competition and they had a head start and it wasn't fair. There's no point in analyzing this other person.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, now I recall people - it was one of the surprises when I went to art school, you know, realizing that there were a lot of people who were talented and supposedly interested in art, but who couldn't care less about a lot of the things that I thought were really super. These were people who supposedly wanted to be artists but who really didn't have much of an appreciation for art. They liked making things, you know, that was the only good thing; they really didn't like other people's art very much.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But in your case, it's obvious that --

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, and I have no idea where that comes from. I don't know whether someone had talked to me about it at some time or I had some kind of art appreciation or something in grammar school. I was fascinated going through those picture books, really, without reading much of the material, although I did read some of them. Some of them had simply biographies in them, and I think my grandmother gave me a book - I guess I was still in grammar school perhaps it was early high school - a volume of short biographies of some famous artists - no pictures, just biography. I remember reading those things and being quite caught up with the whole thing thinking, so that's how it used to be, being an artist. They were very romanticized - the biographies - they ran the gamut from Giotto to Winslow Homer.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you remember which paintings were reproduced in these books in the library that you were most attracted to, whether there's some quality or characteristic that you can look back now and recognize as that which attracted you?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Some. Some of them, I admired mainly because they were famous or maybe for some very obscure reason, but I can remember Vermeer as being somebody who just knocked me out from the very beginning. In those days I didn't know who he was but there was something about those pictures that seemed indeed magical.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Was it the extremely literal treatment, in other words, were you more attracted to the most representational?

ROBERT BECHTLE: I think I was, because I equated good art with realistic art. I think a lot of young people do as do people who are just getting into art. As I went thought the books and got to more modern things, even when modern simply meant, oh, Reginald Marsh. Somehow the more modern things seemed terribly crude, and sloppy, like what happens when an artist has lost touch and doesn't know how to draw any more.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Of course, that must have been encouraging because it made a better chance for you, see. If everybody --

ROBERT BECHTLE: I guess so, because the old masters work always seemed like this unattainable goal, and of course the books romanticize it all so much.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So that seventeenth century might have been something that appealed.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, but not the other painters so much. There was something about the light. I remember also that at some stage, it was later, but it was still before I had the vaguest idea of really who he was that I was interested in Hopper. I was quite taken by *Early Sunday Morning*. I'd seen that in an art book called *One Hundred Masterpieces*. I remember that there were also some kind of strange things. There was a painting by the Mannerist painter, Guido Rene called *Aurora* with all these figures dancing on a cloud, pulling the dawn. I remember being just knocked out by that. I thought it was pretty neat, great colors.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Were you able to make the leap, so to speak, from the reproductions in the art books over to the museum. In other words, did the art books stimulate you to go look at originals?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, they did. I was quite smitten with the idea. I really wanted to see real art. Just seeing original art of any kind was a kick. I remember my grandmother had a little oil painting that a boarder had given her, and I admired it so much that she gave it to me. In fact, I've still got it. It's a little Impressionist painting from a Bay Area artist. But anyway, every time I'd go over to her house I'd look at it.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It had some magic quality.

ROBERT BECHTLE: It was real, honest to goodness art, an oil painting, and I really loved it. My mother would take me to the Oakland Museum which had a really terrible collection at that time. And I occasionally went to the de Young. I was just fascinated looking at the real thing, a real genuine old master painting, was a thrill. I knew really nothing about modern art until the year I went to art school. I started getting interested a little bit when I went to high school, because there was a kid who was a year ahead of me who was sort of interested in modern art. He was the talented artist in high school and older. It seemed like every year there was someone who came through who got involved in all the art projects, was the editor of the yearbook and all that, so I had my turn doing that. The one who was a year ahead of me was into doing some pictures which were sort of quasi-cubist surrealist views of San Francisco. Various things like Coit Tower would be stylized, the lines would disappear into another kind of form and there'd be figures hiding behind things. I really was fascinated by these things. I could see that this guy was good. He was smart and all that, and so I started thinking, well maybe there is something to this modern art. So by the time I had graduated from high school and went to Arts and Crafts, I was really ripe for it, and so at that point I did an about face and chucked the whole old masters. You know, all those brown paintings, I just couldn't look at them any more, and I really got immersed in modern art. I started with Picasso, I suppose, and the Surrealists and gradually to more contemporary things. As a kid, I'd done a lot of reading, so I knew western art history roughly from Giotto up to around 1800, the old master period. Beyond 1800 things started to get a little fuzzy for me. But I knew pretty much the shape of older European art and so when I went to art school then the modern things seemed new and exciting stuff.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I think that's unusual. I may be wrong, but having essentially trained yourself to a certain extent, and developed an interest in art history on your own, I think is very remarkable. I certainly can't remember - it seems that this area is pretty much ignored until college. It's unusual if there is an art appreciation perhaps in high school because very few people qualify to deal with it - it's not one of the basic things - and though you art teacher in high school very often would have, obviously, some familiarity, they wouldn't necessarily be well based in art history. In fact, I was going to ask you this later on - you obviously had a real interest - not all artists do - in art history. You obviously know quite a bit about, or certainly have focused sometimes on rather lesser know figures, printmakers, and so forth. The question I was going to ask was how this developed in high school? And you've answered it: way back when. Did Arts and Crafts require artists to study art history?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, it did. We had --

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Who was teaching?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, actually it was pretty good class. They had a two-semester survey that started with the cave paintings all the way up to Cubism, or anyway, through the thirties. The guy who taught it was Hamilton Wolf. He's an old bay area artist who's a painter. He's from the generation born in the early 1900's. So he was neat to have. He was a gruff, white-haired old man. The main thing that he taught was anatomy and the figure drawing, but he was good to have for an art history survey, I think, because he taught it from the standpoint of an artist who really responded to the works themselves, the paintings and the sculptures, rather than to the chronology and influences and all of that.



PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Which, it's true, that is the more accurate way.

ROBERT BECHTLE: He also had a great abundance of stories about so and so's mistresses and so on, and he would always tell about some goings on that somebody did, and then he would blush bright red. He was one of those people that you look back on with fond memories. Even at the time he was one of the well liked instructors at the school, one of the old figures you consider yourself fortunate to have had as an instructor.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How important do you feel that art history is for the studio artist in art school?

ROBERT BECHTLE: I think it's very important. That's obviously from the standpoint of having an interest in it myself, but I think most artists that I know, that I've talked to, who have achieved something with their own art have really got a pretty well honed knowledge of what happened when and who did what, and a real appreciation of historical art. Sometimes they like things totally different from what you would expect them to like. I can remember being quite startled, for instance, to discover that Manuel Neri was both knowledgeable about and appreciative of the work of Joaquin Sorolla who was a relatively little known Spanish nineteenth century painter. Sorolla is someone whose beach scenes were an influence on what Wayne Thiebaud had once done, so I knew that Wayne knew about these things. There were a couple of Sorolla slides in the slide collection at U.C. Davis, and somehow we got talking about this. Manuel brought it up and asked if I knew these paintings. It's not that I don't know that Manuel's very knowledgeable about art history but Sorolla seemed like something that was so far from what I would think was the kind of art that he would be interested in. But I keep finding those kinds of things when I talk to other artists. The position of the modern artist, particularly painters today, is such that one has to grapple with art history, because part of what one is doing is being a kind of philosopher, taking a certain stand in relation to the incredible achievements of the past. I've sometimes thought that you're putting yourself into a comparative relationship with that and if you don't understand this relationship a lot of the significance of what you're doing is lost. The chutzpah of it all, you know, is lost if you don't know what it is you're putting yourself up against. To be putting yourself in the position of competing with Degas or Eakins or any of these artists, is invariably crazy. There's a lot of brass involved in doing that, you know, and I think that's a part of the significance of what artists do. So if you don't understand the significance of that, a certain edge is missing.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I get the feeling that the generation of art students are somewhat deprived in that particular area which we're discussing, and I'm not sure I can exactly say what years this would encompass in this art school, but it's recent. And it may be, even current in the case, where to do with the philosophy of art education and teaching art - but I must say this, there seem to be a number of young artists that really don't know that much about art history, have a certain disdain for it basically. I'm not talking about commercial artists though, this is the peculiar thing, they feel that that's like compromising one's self, that it's unnecessary, shall we say that the important thing is to make one's statement, this is being an artist, and although this is getting a little ahead of where we should be right now but it's coming up. I'm wondering how you feel about that in connection with, after all you're a teacher and if this is something that you view as a problem or maybe it is - maybe I'm fabricating something.

ROBERT BECHTLE: I don't see it as a problem because all you have to do in your teaching is to set certain requirements and say, by God, they're going to do it, because you know it's important that they do it. At San Francisco State, in fact, we recently increased the history requirement for the painting major - it's nine units now instead of six. This disdain for the past, you know, feeling that what's right now and going to happen is more important than what did happen, is quite common among students. I found it rather strange, when I was in art school to find people who weren't interested in that aspect of art. Because I've always been interested in it, I sort of assumed that everybody else was. Then I would meet people in my art history classes who were taking it only because they had to, but they didn't really have a feel for it, they didn't enjoy it.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Of course, that sometimes can be the fault of the instructor.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, that's true, but a lot of it had to do with that kind of youthful rebellion, I think. You didn't want to worry about the past, you just simply wanted to deal with what was right now and what was going to be.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You said a few moments ago that that was your experience. You had had this great interest in the old masters and then you went on to art school, the California College of Arts and Crafts, and all of a sudden you had no use for these old brown paintings and you became very interested in modern art. So it seems that your development maybe shifted?

ROBERT BECHTLE: I guess it was. Taking in what was recent, what was new, what was beginning to be outstanding. But it's still art history, it's just that it's more recent. I began to have an appreciation of stuff that I hadn't even looked at very much before, so I think I went overboard because it was all new to me. You know, the modern stuff was just like somebody had opened doors on a new world and so I rushed through to find out what

all this stuff was about.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What figures were you attracted to, famous ones?

ROBERT BECHTLE: I was interested, I guess, in the Cubists. Picasso, Braque, because they related to some extent with what I was discovering in design classes. It's a way of getting into the ideas of what modern art is all about, understanding what abstract art is, so, at that stage, Cubists and Constructivists made sense to me. Then there's a period that, I guess, every art student goes through, where you get caught up by Surrealism. I discovered Dali the first year and he dominated my thinking.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: We all did. It's an interesting thing because it seems to be almost universal. I know, myself, when I was first taking classes in the art history things, I must have done two or three papers on Salvador Dali, and I, at one point, viewed him as the definition of almost modern art. As you promised your students, I, indeed, got over it, but what is it? I think it's worth talking about for a minute. What is it, is it the accessibility of technique, or the admiration of technique combined with this imaginative strange juxtaposition of weird forms, an interest in the bizarre?

ROBERT BECHTLE: I don't know, I think it must be some of that, because certainly it's quite obvious that the technique and skill was equivalent to traditional painting. Yet it seems modern and even abstract at the same time. Then, of course, I guess it plays on fantasies and dreams and so on. People are always fascinated by that, I think. They respond to a kind of art which is obviously skillful, which seems to be avant-garde and yet is very accessible. Then I think there's also something very romantic about it, particularly if you read about it. The stuff like the Dada movement and the beginnings of Surrealism, the outlandish things that those people did epitomizes the way art students in particular like to think of themselves. I think there's a way of somehow making a personal connection with that stuff, a self-image of the artists as zany rebel that just clicks.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about your self-image as an art student? It must have been changing. Were you attracted at all to the Bohemian lifestyle, you know, the way real artists were supposed to be?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes and no. I can remember those four years as being perpetual confusion and perpetual change. I came to Arts and Crafts from middle class Alameda which is even more middle class than lots of places, and I was living at home at the time, too - that's the only way I could afford to go to school there.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It's hard to be a bohemian and live at home.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, you know. But also, coming just out of high school, I was your basic junior jitterbug. I had gone through high school and had been involved, to a certain extent, in student government and doing decorations for the dances, and so on. Then all of a sudden I was at Arts and Crafts, and Arts and Crafts at that time was full of GIs from the second world war who were still going to school. They were no nonsense, they were working their tails off. And then there were a smattering of people like myself who were really wet behind the ears, right out of high school. And so it was a strange thing to come up against. There was a social life at Arts and Crafts among the beginning freshmen students that was kind of like a continuation of high school, you know, dances, and so on.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And the older students --

ROBERT BECHTLE: And the older students were into the whole Bohemian bit. Maybe not Bohemian exactly, just that they'd go off to a bar down the street north of the school called Bill McNally's. To this day it is where the Arts and Crafts students hang out. No class, no style, just the nearest bar, you know, and these guys would take off after class or they'd take a break and then go down to McNally's and drink beer. You know, I just wasn't ready for that kind of thing, and I think anyway my connections during the first year were really more - my social life - was really more with Alameda kids. I got a job at Arts and Crafts, working in the student supply shop during my second semester, and was thrown into contact with a lot of bright new people. They were my fellow workers in the store, you know, ex-GIs. They were all juniors and seniors, and a couple of grad students. Through them, I got involved in a marionette show during my second year. There had been a class during the summer in marionette making. It was taught by the person I had had as a design teacher, and these people had gotten together and decided they were going to do a marionette show. One of the people, as a matter of fact, was Clayton Pinkerton.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Clay was a student there at that time?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Clay was a senior, I guess. Being a part of that marionette show was really the changing of my emotional attachment from Alameda to Arts and Crafts. From there on I was totally immersed in it. Now, I was a sophomore, so I was, what, nineteen? They had cast parties, naturally, many cast parties and that was when I really started drinking beer. I went to these parties where I didn't get home until the early morning, you know, and my poor mother was tearing her hair out. We'd sometimes take off after a party and go over and

sleep on the beach, Stinson Beach. Some of the people in the group were gay, and so sometimes we'd go over to gay bars like the Black Cat or 12 Adler Place and so it was intoxicating to be shown the Bohemian artist's life with all its carrying on, drinking, strange sexual preferences and so on.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: We have you now at art school and we were talking a few minutes ago about your discovery of the real artist's activity, the Bohemian life. You mentioned Clayton Pinkerton as one of the older students, or ahead of you, at any rate, that was involved in activities that left definite marks at this point of passage, or growing up, shall we say in that sense. What about some of your other, your fellow students there, were there any that come to mind that were somewhat important to you at the time, friendships in terms of work?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes. There were various people with whom I still maintain contact who were friends that I made in art school. I was just trying to think about the timing on some of that, you know, for instance Charles Gill who is now the head of the print department at Arts and Crafts is someone whose friendship goes back to when we were students together. I guess that I knew him when I was a sophomore. He was about a year behind me and he had just come in to the school. We've been fairly close off and on ever since. There were people who were in my graduate class, Sam Richardson, for example, who are now fairly prominent as artists.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Just for the record, you did your undergraduate years from 1950 to 1954, right? And then 1956 to 1958, you went back and got your MFA.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, and the group that was there as graduates when I was included George Miyasaki who is at U.C. Berkeley now, and Dick Graf who teaches at the San Francisco Art Institute. Some of those people, Miyasaki especially, were a very strong influence on me for awhile. But backtracking a little so I can answer the question, when I was at Arts and Crafts as an undergraduate, I was a design major, or advertising art major, though not necessarily knowing what my program was going to be in order to make a living as an artist, I went through the design program, and graduated as an artist with commercial art skills even though by the time I was a sophomore my interest in painting was beginning to really assert itself again. I was really like a Sunday painter, taking classes that I had to take, lettering and layout and that sort of thing, and then, on the side, I was painting pretty much on my own. Some of the students who were influential on me as an undergraduate were design students, people who were a couple of years ahead of me and who were "biggies" in that department. I just wanted to emulate them and so as well as they did. These were people that I've since lost contact with so I don't even know where they are now or what they are doing. The painting contacts were, I suppose, more second hand. The painting that I was doing was largely without instruction. I had a couple of painting classes, but they were not terribly influential. Most of the influential teaching that I was getting at Arts and Crafts at that time was coming out of the design faculty, like Wolfgang Lederer who is still head of the design department. He had a great influence. Not in terms of style or anything like that, but just in terms of attitude; what it meant to be an artist, or a professional artist, the kind of time that was involved, the commitment, the seriousness, the need not to be satisfied easily, and to keep digging at things. He was a real martinet about that kind of thing. He was a marvelous influence.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Who else in the faculty do you remember favorably in that connection?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, I mentioned Hamilton Wolf in the early stage, and that was primarily in art history. I also remember an anatomy class with Cart Beetz who was one of the great anatomy teachers here. Thiebaud studied with him at some point, I think, and so did McLean. Beetz had studied with George Bridgeman who was at the Art Students League in New York. He was part of a connection that actually traces its roots from one teacher to the next back to Eakins in Philadelphia, and thence to Gerome in Paris. Then I had George Post as a watercolor teacher. He was one of the old California watercolorists of the 1930's. He would paint with that kind of juicy, California watercolor style, you know laundry hanging on the line, fishing boats, that kind of thing. By the time I had classes with him he had worked it out almost to a formula, but in the thirties it was pretty original stuff. He had a very abbreviated style. I couldn't say that it was a direct influence on what I'm doing now, but I certainly can see that the sense of light that he got by using a lot of white paper and putting in really dark shadows and so on was a device that I use now in dealing with sunlight.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I'm not sure on this. But I believe Diebenkorn had some connection about this time with Arts and Crafts. Is that so or is that wrong?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, that was slightly later. Diebenkorn was a big influence on all of us that were there in the late fifties when I went back to do graduate work. Nate Oliveira was also a big influence at that time. I knew Nate from a distance as a student, but Charlie Gill was taking a litho class with him, and so through Gill I developed a kind of admiration from afar. When I came back in 1958 after being in the army, I decided that I was going to give painting a try, and so I applied as a graduate student in painting and design and came back and found that Diebenkorn was the big hero on the faculty. He had just come over there after being at the Art Institute for a number of years.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you take a class with him?

ROBERT BECHTLE: I never did. It was one of those dumb things. I certainly regret not ever having done so, but I avoided him for perverse reasons. It was just that everybody seemed so influenced by Diebenkorn, and everybody was trying to paint like him. When I came back and saw that I said, "God, I'm not going to get caught up in that, I'm not going to take a class with that man," and so I didn't. I've always regretted not doing it, because I got caught up in his influence anyway. So it turns out his teaching had a strong influence on me without my ever coming into direct contact with him. The closest I ever came to any kind of contact was the fact that he was on my graduate committee when I was ready to graduate. I remember his asking some probing questions about why some of the paintings I was showing were abstract and others were figurative. Every good graduate student today knows that you must put out a body of work in which everything is consistent. I had some paintings which were total abstractions, non-objective sort of Abstract Expressionist kinds of things and also had these figurative paintings, still lifes and so on, and he asked, "What does this mean? Why do you do this, and then do this other?"

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What did you say?

ROBERT BECHTLE: I don't remember exactly. I tried to rationalize it somehow, but what it really meant was that I was simply floundering at that stage, that I didn't really know what I was trying to do. If I were in that situation today in our graduate program at San Francisco State, I wouldn't have graduated, but things were a little easier then.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But you did get your MFA, despite the fact of this floundering in front of Diebenkorn?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, well, the stuff wasn't that bad. When I look back on it, there was a thread through it. What was the floundering, I suppose, was the fact that I really couldn't make up my mind whether I would be an abstract artist, which, up to that point, had seemed what modern artists had to be. And then these figures which came from Diebenkorn were like something out of the past, something that I had purged all through art school. The teaching when I was undergraduate had always been that modern art was, if not abstract, at least interpretive and formal. I was taught to draw things the way they looked in a way of learning, but then once you were making "real art" it had to be abstracted.

Yet Diebenkorn was certainly telling us that it was okay to paint things more or less the way they looked. One could certainly start with that. One could paint a coffee cup on a table top and still make serious modern art. That was kind of what I was fighting with, trying to make some kind of sense out of that. It took a while. Even after school, I was floundering around. The basic process tended to be similar, but I was doing something that had sort of very generalized figures in it one week and the next week I'd turn around and paint something which was almost completely abstract.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, as a student, then, I gather you would say you were in a sense resisting what turned out to be your natural inclination, or tendency to the representational, the figurative.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, possibly, probably because - I don't know whether "resisting" is the right word - it's just that all of what was being taught and what I was open to as an undergraduate were things which were totally new to me, and they were quite the opposite of representational painting. I finally reached a point where the representation started to sneak back in from a very unexpected kind of source, and so that tended to cause a lot of indecision. Well, you have to realize as an undergraduate I really didn't have any ideas. I thought I did, but I didn't. I was just a sort of sponge and did what was expected in different classes. I was influenced by things I saw in books or in galleries and so on, but basically there was no thread in it, there was no meaning, just a lot of confusion. The need didn't start appearing until, I guess, the end of graduate work. It was during that period of struggle, between trying to grasp things which I felt were what a modern artist should do and this feeling for the representational that somehow it became okay to do that again. Diebenkorn was doing it.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's interesting. He was such an influence there, a general influence at that time the late fifties I guess, certainly by then, that it was almost like a presence of something to be dealt with. And by then, I suppose, well, let me rephrase this. Were you aware of the slightly earlier, I suppose "conflict" is the word I want to use, between the two camps, the figurative and the Clyfford Still, California School of Fine Arts, legacy which was still there, I suppose, in the early fifties. At least, the influence of Still was very much felt. Were you aware of this? Was this something that was pretty well recognized by students that there were these two possibilities?

ROBERT BECHTLE: I think so. Although it seemed at the time that, as you become aware of what was going on, the ones who were influenced by Still were the avant-garde, while the other seemed more and more a conservative and retrograde type of thing. The painting instruction at Arts and Crafts at that time was generally pretty old-fashioned, old-fashioned in the sense that they were just getting out of Cezanne. There were no really heavy people there that I can recall that were into the Abstract Expressionism that was going on at the Art Institute at that time. As we became more aware of what was happening there around 1953, I started being

more attuned to it and began to look towards the Institute, towards those artists as being the models that we emulated, and not so much our own instructors. Of course for me that was certainly complicated by the fact that I was taking design classes and so I'd hear that there was this big thing happening across the Bay which was exciting and so on, and which I couldn't really understand. It was impossible for me just to go out and paint pictures like they were painting there. It seemed to go in the face of what I had been taught. I mean, you could recognize that there was something there so, I suppose, it gradually became a case of assimilating it, of getting to a point where maybe you could paint pictures that looked like that, then all of a sudden here comes Diebenkorn. He's taking the same impetus, the same tradition, and all of a sudden he's painting from the figure. Not from the old, kind of tired Cezanne figuration that we had seen, but something which is respectable within an avant-garde context. So it was a way of having your cake and eating it too, of somehow being able to make use of everything you had been taught and still be "avant-garde" at the same time. That's a good thing, you know, if you can swing it.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's interesting. Well, do you feel that, in a sense, this was - it wasn't just Diebenkorn - his contribution to this area at that time, to fuse the two, to offer this legitimate alternative to gestural, action painting, to Clyfford Still.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, I suspect that it was. As a subsequent model, I think his influence goes beyond that. Even now, you'll find bits of what I would consider Diebenkorn's influence creeping up in my paintings. They don't look like Diebenkorn but the influence is still there. See, at the time, what I was interested in as a student was the look of a painting before I understood the substance of it. What Diebenkorn was saying to people who were in his classes didn't always sink in right away. I don't think people really understood what he was about. But the look, the gesture, and the action painting surface that he got was quite apparent, and that's what we tried to paint without understanding what was behind it. Now, I think, when I understand more of what was behind it, I don't need the look.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, of course, now I can't resist asking the obvious question. What do you feel is that, can you put into words, that quality, that which it really was about, as you were saying, rather than just the look, in speaking about Diebenkorn?

ROBERT BECHTLE: A lot of things. One of the things that it was about was change, and taking risks, and keeping the painting open until you find that it can't exist in any other way. To a large extent, I've always seen Diebenkorn's painting as having to do with the surface, you know, it's about the picture plane and so on. It's about forms that are locked together on the surface and at the same time make a shallow space because of color changes and because of overlapping forms. It's a classic modern painting problem, but if you think of Diebenkorn and then think of Matisse who was Diebenkorn's influence, one of his great heroes, you can see that connection, the physical locking of one shape against another shape. It can happen in painting which is extremely realistic as well. I would say that particular sense of structure, strange interlockings of diagonals, edges, and so on is still part of the painting, a very strong part. That's as much what the paintings are about as, say, the subject matter.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So then, the recent, the Ocean Park Series, you feel that the same would apply.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Oh, yes, very much so.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: If that may be a more, I don't want to say "obvious" example, well in a sense it is, it's more clearly because you certainly see what you're talking about at work in the *Ocean Park Series*.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Oh, it's true. Even in the earlier paintings he was doing before the figurative things, there's a thread that runs through his work which is extremely consistent.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And so you feel, as you say, that you still find his influence creeping up on you and appearing in your work, although your paintings don't look a bit like his. It's interesting. Who else would you say - we spent a little time talking about the importance of Richard Diebenkorn, obviously you're willing to go on record as acknowledging that. Is there anybody else who comes to mind, maybe not necessarily from your student days - this opens up a Pandora's box, of course - but is there anybody especially that would take a similar role or similar position?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Probably not in the same sense, I mean there are a lot of works I liked, I'd look at. For a while I was influenced by Oliveira's work, but it was not particularly lasting. I looked at Hopper's stuff a lot, you know, and Vermeer, of course, Velasquez, Manet or people like Degas. There were things that I would pick up on from these artists. I'm really very Catholic in my taste about artists, even work which is very dissimilar. I look at someone whose work I like and learn things even though that person's style and the attitude may be light-years away from my own. But in terms of being a kind of general influence, I don't really think of anyone other than Diebenkorn. There are other artists who are close friends such as Charles Gill, and Dick McLean. They were also very influential at certain points. Of course they were also influenced by Diebenkorn, so in a sense that was all

part of the same package. Thiebaud has also been an influence on me, not his painting so much as his attitudes.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Attitudes towards subjects and things?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Towards subjects and also about the role of an artist.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about Hopper, it's inevitable that that question comes up. You mentioned him two or three times now as we've talked. What is it, specifically, about Hopper that appeals, and I guess continues to appeal?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, I suppose it's that sense of stillness, that sense of time standing still like the paintings are in suspended animation. His structure is very strongly articulated in terms of planes and of light and shadow pattern. The paintings are essentially abstract although he may not have considered himself in that way. Drawing that kind of attitude out of what were for him everyday situations in the city, country, etc. and being able to invest them with a kind of poetry that somehow makes you feel that you're seeing a bit of ordinary life in a way you've never quite seen it before, is an achievement that impresses me. Like many artists, he's very uneven. He's done some really terrible paintings, real dogs, but even in the worst that sensibility is still there. I remember reading something that he said in answer to a question. Asked what he was after in his paintings, he said, "Well, I'm after me, myself." He had a probing attitude about making paintings, he knew what painting was about.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you feel that a real affinity - would you say you're trying to - seeking to achieve some of the same qualities in your own work?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, to a certain extent. I don't see myself as being at all like him. He was a totally different kind of personality, different background, different times and all that. I'm certainly not trying to emulate Hopper, but that particular quality of taking a very ordinary moment and somehow causing it to become kind of magical through devices which are not even always apparent is something that interests me a lot. In other words, instead of doing something very dramatic or fantastic where the magic isn't really magic anymore because it's all so obvious, but rather doing the opposite, making this thing seem so absolutely bland and ordinary that you have to look twice at it, but causing you to realize that something's happening there that is quite extraordinary. That's what I would like to have happen, and the artists that I respond to most, the people I consider my real heroes, are those that I think do that kind of thing. Hopper is an artist that does. Vermeer has that quality. I think some of Winslow Homer's things have it, some of Thomas Eakins's things have it, some of Velasquez has it. There's a very magical quality that these artists have that I respond to anyway, that I would like somehow to have happen in my painting, but all you can do is hope it happens. There's no way you can just put that in, there's no formula.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, you see yourself very much in the honorable tradition of American Realism, the indigenous tradition then because again, the names you invoke, Eakins, Homer, Hopper, are some of the main landmarks along the way. You also mention something else, a phenomenon that you find in Hopper's work which you call a very - you talk of this magical quality. It brings to mind something that art historians refer to as "magic realism" almost like a movement, the extension of - one extension of the Realist tradition in American art. Some of the artists that are put in that category are people like, well, Andrew Wyeth. And of course, Andrew Wyeth has to a certain extent suffered from overexposure and also critical hostility, and what I'd like to ask you is how do you - I'm not necessarily asking you what you think Wyeth's - how do you see your position in connection with Wyeth's work. Do you feel any affinity there?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Not particularly, no.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You really feel that you're after completely different things, or is that the case?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, I really don't know. Maybe not, it's just that Wyeth is an artist that I see as being a nineteenth century artist, essentially. He's coming out of the rural American tradition which doesn't exist anymore. He is an anachronism in the sense of the realist being an artist who deals not just with technical sense of trying to make pictures that look accurate, but is someone who is interested in the substance and texture of everyday life as it exists right now. Wyeth's not involved with it at all; while it's his daily life that he paints, and it's an honest thing that he's doing, you know, it's just that his whole life style, is so completely different, from the reality of twentieth-century American life. I envy him his life style, frankly, but it's so completely out of step with what most of American life is about that it sets him off in a category which is really very isolated and I think, nostalgic. That's why I don't feel any particular affinity with what he is doing however much I admire some of his work. "Magic realism" I really don't care much for. I see it as a kind of cross between Realism and Surrealism. The emphasis seems to be on the magic part too much, on fantasy. To me, the idea of making magic happen out of everyday circumstances means that you have to play the game in such a way that the magic sneaks in. You can't put it there or force it to work, otherwise it becomes a fantasy, it becomes a thing in which I'm no longer interested. I respond to those kinds of paintings the same way that I respond to Salvador Dali. I admire his skill

and all that but it's just too obvious and contrived. I really like – in effect art that is able to sneak up on you and through subtle means make you see things you have never seen before in a new way. That's where people like Hopper, Eakins and other people are so good. It's art which seems not to be doing anything other than being very straightforward, you know, very descriptive, and yet it's not. Like in Theodore Dreiser, you're not aware of the skill and you're not aware of the art but somehow he catches you up in his seemingly mundane kinds of descriptions of very ordinary things and then all of a sudden you realize that something's happened. I really like that kind of thing. The same with movies, *The Last Picture Show* for instance, because it's that kind of thing. An out front kind of realism that suddenly turns out to be very poetic and reveals much without making you aware of the art.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You said something earlier that interested me quite a bit. You talked about as a child, very young, drawing cars, which looks interesting in terms of some of your later work and images.

ROBERT BECHTLE: We shouldn't make too much of that.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's not why it interested me, though, although some pick up on that, I suppose, so your cautionary remark is recorded. But you then also mentioned that your son draws airplanes. What you said I thought was very interesting and that is, the connection between delineating and the need or desire to possess, this idea of possession, and perhaps one would expand on that to a certain extent in connection with our activity in general, the need to possess or, perhaps to control, in order to one's environment. I don't know that there's necessarily too much difference between that, it's filling that sort of need – I was about to make some wise remark that this is obviously the reason that artist started drawing nude women. It seemed a natural. But at any rate, I wonder what your thoughts are about that, because it seems to me in your work – it's not my position to sit here and essentially describe or evaluate your work but I feel, personally, that there's some of this in what you do. It's imposing a certain order. I won't say any more than that. How does that strike you, that whole notion?

ROBERT BECHTLE: You know, it makes sense. I haven't really thought about it quite in terms of relating to childhood drawings in that sense of possession, but certainly one of the things that art does, I think, for the artist, anyway, a person who is making it which is – he has that sense of ordering the environment. Making something in which total control over he's doing. He is absolutely responsible for the success or failure of whatever he's doing. Going beyond that to what you're talking about, in relation to this – painting or a painting specifically – that sense of possession or perhaps establishing a certain times, or perhaps certain places in such a way that the fleeting quality of time tends to be destroyed – that's probably a lot of what it's about. I might do a painting of some house I have driven by often. Part of the rationale of the painting is purely formal. It becomes a device for ordering color and changes and so forth, the mechanics of the painting. But it also becomes a way of taking something of absolutely no consequence, and by making a painting of it, giving it a quality that might be monumental, or at least freezing it to the point where it's a very existential moment. It all of a sudden has importance, and so there's a way of possessing that. That goes back to what I was saying earlier about Hopper.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's probably so. What about Sheeler, an artist like that? By suggesting an affinity, is that pushing it, is that something you feel?

ROBERT BECHTLE: I don't know.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Sort of monumentality.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yeah, right. For me, anyway, some of the earlier Sheelers, particularly the realist pieces, I see in that sense. Yes, particularly those things that he did of the interior of his farm house, the Shaker furniture, the carpets, and so on. These are not ordinary things, obviously, but they're part of his environment, and he has given them importance beyond what they might ordinarily have. But I always see his main thrust as being more towards an abstract formalist idiom than the subject matter, even though it is important to him, it is less what the paintings are about. His choice of New England motifs or of industrial motifs is important, but he puts it into a formalist structure which is essentially a Cubist way of thinking. I don't think it's quite the same thing as what I do.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Of course, one of the things you admire about Hopper is the abstraction.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, it's very subtle. There's a difference, because in Hopper the structure is important and yet it's not what the painting is about. The painting is about something else, something a little more, perhaps a little slipperier than that and you can't quite put your finger on it. I think that Hopper somehow appeals on a more personal level than Sheeler does. It's not that one's necessarily better than the other but it's just that with Sheeler there's a kind of intellectual distance. In Hopper it's more emotional and intuitive yet when you sit and look at it you gradually discover an intellectual architecture for the painting.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I think that's true. Well, getting back to our chronology that we were attempting to

maintain, it seems to me that you – we got you through school, we got you through art school this morning, and you graduated, you got your MFA in 1958 despite the fact that you yourself say, you hadn't really established, I guess a real direction, and then for some time afterwards you were still looking around you and working and so forth. What did you do, what was the development? Not necessarily in your work so much at this point, but what happened to you afterwards?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, maybe I should backtrack and pick up those two years between graduate and undergraduate school which were taken up while I was in the army. Since I graduated with a design background, right after I got out of school I went around with my portfolio to try to get a job. I got a job with the Kaiser company – they had a graphic art department. It was just a summer job, and so I worked there for about three months and then I got my papers from Uncle Sam saying, "We'd love to have you come and join us." At that point I was tired of school. I'm sure if I'd wanted to go on to graduate school I could have gotten another deference since in 1954 there was no shooting going on, and deferments were easy to come by. But I was so fed up with school at that point and with my social life (my love life at that time had come upon rocky shoals) that I decided – it was kind of like joining the Foreign Legion, you know, I might as well do it and get it over with. So I went in the army and interestingly enough after basic training, I got posted to service in Berlin, Germany. I had infantry training, and we were sent over there to be part of the show-the-flag thing in the cold war. It was the ideal place for someone just out of art school to go. There were marvelous museums and the opera and symphony, etc.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That obviously was your first trip abroad.

ROBERT BECHTLE: That was the first time I had ever been any further out of California than Lake Tahoe and so it was an absolute thrill to be sent over there. I didn't even know anything about Germany at the time. I was still thinking of them as all those bad guys in the war.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: The Hun --

ROBERT BECHTLE: The Hun, yes that sort of thing. But just the opportunity of being in a foreign country was exciting to me. Since we were garrisoned, we were off duty at five o'clock most of the time. We'd go off around town. It was like having a job only it was a little less free.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How long were you there?

ROBERT BECHTLE: I was there about a year, a year and a half. I went to a couple of the art school parties there, the art school in Berlin, and I saw the Dahlem Museum [Gemaldegalerie, Berlin-Dahlem] there which has the collection from the old Berlin museum that the Western allies had managed to snag. It was over in a large old country house in Western Berlin and it included things like the head of Nefertiti, Rembrandt's *Man in a Golden Helmet*, a couple of just smashing Vermeers, etc. It was a small collection but just absolutely first rate. On a Saturday afternoon, I would go by the museum for an hour – I could treat it very casually. It was my first experience at being able to do that on that level of quality. I was able to take a couple of leaves and travel. I went to Italy for a couple of weeks and had a chance to see the big museums there. Uffizi --

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What was your response or need I ask?

ROBERT BECHTLE: It was like being a kid with a candy jar. I loved everything about it and considered myself really lucky to have had the opportunity.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you encounter any artists you weren't familiar with that you weren't aware of, that really impressed you? Let's put it this way, were there any revelations in that sense?

ROBERT BECHTLE: No at that time, no. Well, one reason I think at that point was that, most of what you see in museums are things you're expected to see. Other things that I perhaps should have been more open to, I wasn't ready for, and so what I saw was what I really expected to see. I didn't make any particular discoveries. It was a very fallow period for me in terms of working. I didn't do very much of anything in the way of work while I was in the army, so I was really a tourist. I wasn't really thinking about art so intently at that time. But I thought a lot about what I wanted to do when I got back. I knew that I wanted to go back to school and work in painting and not in design. So I was able to do that. One of the reasons that I went back to Arts and Crafts and no where else was that I knew that I would probably be accepted there. By applying there I was able to get out of the army a couple of months early and to go back to school.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What is it, a two-year tour?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, it was twenty-four months – it ended up actually twenty-two or something like that. When I got back I went down to Kaiser – it was the day after I came back – just to see people, really. One of the designers had quit, and they were having a going away party for him that Friday and so they said, "Come to the



party and then come to work Monday.” So I came in, not as a paste-up man, but as a replacement designer. I was able to work there full time for a while and then when I started back to school they let me work part time as an art director and designer of publications. I did that for about three years while I was doing my graduate work at Art’s and Crafts. Then another one of those little flukes that can change your life came up. When my old design teacher at Arts and Crafts called me and said that they had an opening for someone to teach an advertising design class, I said I would be interested in trying it, even though teaching had not been something I had thought very much about doing.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, this was right after you finished graduate school.

ROBERT BECHTLE: No, this was during graduate school.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: During. You were teaching.

ROBERT BECHTLE: All of these things were going on at the same time, so I was teaching an advertising class while I was working part time at Kaiser. I liked the teaching well enough. I considered it a compromise that could allow better hours to paint, if you could get into teaching on a permanent basis. As a painter it’s not a good thing to be a graphic artist. It takes too much time, and it drains so much energy – you just don’t have it to paint. So I was able to talk Mr. Lederer into getting me another class so I would be able to earn enough by teaching. Finally I was able to quit Kaiser and go into teaching full time.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So it all developed very --

ROBERT BECHTLE: It happened very fortunately. It was a very exciting time for me. That’s when the painting was changing too. When I started graduate school I was painting sort of abstract paintings which were partly collages with pasted paper, and so on. I was also somehow trying to assimilate my European experience and I was doing things that were based upon it – semiabstract views of Venice, views of the bombed out sections of Berlin, and so on. Then I changed from that kind of thing to the Bay Area Figurative that everybody was doing really because Diebenkorn was doing it. That was an exciting transition. Even being involved in commercial art and just trying to see if I could cut it was exciting. It’s one thing to do that in school, but it’s something else to have to do it on a day-to-day basis. So that was going on and I was getting into teaching for the first time. A lot of big changes.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you taught. And then you went on full time right after you finished graduate work.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes. There may have been another year, I don’t remember the exact sequence in there. I’d have to sit down and really look at the contracts to find out, but basically that’s what I did. I taught in the design department full time. I was teaching advertising, illustration, and general design courses. Later, I was able to shift the teaching emphasis. I had been doing a lot of lithography and so, when George Miyasaki who had been teaching lithography at Arts and Crafts went to Cal, I was able to take that position. I taught a couple of litho classes as well as design classes and gradually moved from the design department to the fine arts department.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Printmaking primarily?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Primarily printmaking, and then some drawing.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So how long did you teach, then, at Arts and Crafts?

ROBERT BECHTLE: I started there in 1957 – I think that was when I did that first design class. I’ve taught there off and on ever since.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Not right now – you’re at State --

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Even though you teach over at San Francisco State --

ROBERT BECHTLE: Sure, but I’ve been teaching a printmaking class at Arts and Crafts every other semester for a change of pace. I have a great affection for the old school.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: When did you stop teaching full time at Arts and Crafts? What would mark a shift in --

ROBERT BECHTLE: I guess it was in 1965. There was an opportunity to teach at Berkeley in the design department as a sabbatical replacement. Someone was on leave and so I taught two semesters there and then the following year I went up to Davis as a visiting artist. I went up to Davis for a year. I had a leave of absence from Arts and Crafts because I felt I needed to get away. I’d been at Arts and Crafts so much as a student and then as a teacher. There are a lot of ex- students that are teaching there, spending their whole career in one

place and I could see myself getting caught into that. I wanted to see what it would be like to teach at other places, to see what other opportunities might come up. It's one thing teaching in an art school and something else dealing with university students. Later, a position in painting opened up at S.F. State.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That was what, 1967?

ROBERT BECHTLE: 1968. The Davis job was actually about a year and a half.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Were these paintings positions or drawing?

ROBERT BECHTLE: The job at Berkeley was a design position – that was strictly a way of getting out of Arts and Crafts and seeing if I could teach at Berkeley. But the job at Davis was painting and drawing, as is that at S.F. State.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Which you wanted I suppose.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Which I really wanted. I didn't mind teaching it but it wasn't really what my interest was. It's funny that Arts and Crafts tends to pigeonhole people a lot, and you wind up teaching the same class over and over if you're not careful. If you get pigeonholed in the design department then that's what they think of you as. So I've never taught painting there except for one summer session. I think that's the only time I taught painting at Arts and Crafts, because I was never a painting person to them.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And maybe they still don't think so?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Now I don't know. It sometimes takes moving to another place to get your home base to think of you in a different light.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's always the case. Maybe we ought to end here. We've covered a lot of ground. We'll pick up at some point in the not too distant future and talk about some other things.

## SECOND SESSION

LOCATION: SUBJECT'S STUDIO, BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

DATE: DECEMBER 28, 1978

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Last time, quite some time ago, now it seems we talked about your own biography: about growing up, art school experience and professional experience, this type of thing. It seems to me we were leading into a discussion of your more recent work, particularly that point at which you came to the style that is pretty well current and that you continue to work within, and your connection with what's called New Realism. I'm wondering if you could just briefly fill that in – just how you shifted back – if this is, in fact, what it was – shifted to the realist style, because I gather you'd been working in the Bay Area Figurative manner for a while or at least connections – you had some connections with Abstract Expressionism.

ROBERT BECHTLE: I don't remember exactly where we had left in talking before.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: We did have you in Europe.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Okay, that's what I was wondering about, because the work that I had been doing between the time that I started painting in graduate school and the time that I went to Europe was pretty much influenced by Diebenkorn and Nathan Oliveira and, I guess, Elmer Bishoff, you know, that Bay Area Figurative style. I guess I went to Europe in 1961, and I had wanted to progress from that point. I hadn't really any idea what kind of changes were going to take place in the work, and so that was the time which I could, I suppose, in effect, get away from a public position. In other words, I could do work – I suppose you could do this anyway – while I was here there was always the feeling that somebody was going to see what I was doing, that I was going to show it or whatever; and while I was in Europe there was a chance to do some work there with no one to look at it, and I found that some of the things that I was starting to do became fairly objective in simply recording things that I saw, things that I called postcards. I was doing pictures of St. Mark's square in Venice, or the Grand Canal, or something like that, literally souvenirs, and then also some drawings that were little still lifes of things in hotel rooms and on restaurant tables and so on. The earliest ones had still a lot of overtones of that Bay Area Figurative style, fairly expressionistic in the way they looked, but gradually they were beginning to kind of tighten up and appear and a mark of trying to record very precisely what I was seeing. At the same time that these things were going on, there was a sense of, I guess, becoming more aware of the appearances of California, you know, the distance sort of helped, and I began to see that the subject matter that was around me when I was at home had some possibilities for the painting although I didn't know precisely what I was going to do with it. There were a number of shows that I saw in New York that were very influential in that sense, sort of making me look more at the immediate world. There was a show of Larry Rivers, I guess in Paris. He was doing paintings of cigarette packages and French money and so on, and I remember seeing some work by some of the

English pop artists in London – that was just sort of beginning to happen over there.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Somebody like --

ROBERT BECHTLE: Peter Phillips was one, and I became aware of Hockney at that point although I don't remember whether I actually – I saw some of his things in books and magazines, but I don't recall actually seeing his work. I remember seeing an exhibition of Peter Phillips and then I think another one was Peter Blake. The look of it was quite different from what Larry Rivers did, the ideas were sort of fit into a little niche in my head that seemed to make some kind of sense. At the same time when I was looking at works in museums over there, the pieces that really impressed me the most were not so much the Expressionist things which were the things that I had liked a lot when I was in school, but were more things like Vermeer, Velasquez and so on, and I got turned onto these artists who made a point of doing a kind of quiet interpretation of what they were seeing, and those things kind of clicked into place in a funny way so that when I got back to the States I was willing to sort of pursue that a little bit without feeling that it was necessarily going to lead to some kind of public statement. It was like the feeling while traveling in Europe that I was taking kind of a hiatus from doing some kind of "serious" work, and I managed to kind of keep that going for a little while after I got back. I worked without really showing anything to anybody, and it was kind of a challenge to see if I could paint things fairly realistically. It was a challenge in a sense, because it was something that we hadn't really done in school, you know. As a part of your training you had to sit down and draw still lifes and so on. It was always with the idea that eventually you went beyond that into something much more interpretive, and the idea of trying to sit down and make a painting that looked like what was in front of you was discouraged at school. So it was a challenge to sort of see if you couldn't do that: make a fairly ambitious painting, fairly large paintings, and that was it. In a sense, it was like backing into a style, sort of like trying to reject all the appearances in style that I had become comfortable with and expected painting to have which would be Expressionist in appearance, and trying to do something which were basically thought of as studies without really thinking about whether they were supposed to be art or not.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What was the media of it, primarily? You were using in Europe – did you do any paintings, or primarily just sketches, drawings, watercolors?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, they'd be equivalent to watercolors. What I was using was a – I got a box of pastels, a little jar of white poster paint, and a couple of brushes. So I worked out a technique where I would put the pastel down on the paper rather quickly, the basic color, and then I would go back over that with water on the brush and start smearing things together and then start painting with the white poster paint into that. The poster paint mixed with the pastel became like gouache and so the end result looked like a combination of gouache and chalk added. They were more painting than they were pastel drawings by the time they were finished, but they were on a very small scale. They were in halves and so they were – the biggest ones were about 10 x 14 inches or something like that. Very portable – that was the whole point as being something you could carry around.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And so in this case, necessity once again was the mother of invention.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Is it possible to remember what your attitude was towards the little exercises, the records you were producing? You said that, in a sense, they were as much souvenirs, records of an experience that you were interested in – you were looking at things around you in a foreign country, looking at things around you in a new way, because they were perhaps more exotic to you by virtue of being not California, not being the United States. Still, you were working, you chose these means to record them which were part of your own background, your own training as an artist. Can you recall which was the overriding interest then? Was it pretty much equal? Do you see what I'm getting at? Were you approaching these things as an artist, as subjects for art, or were you more recording like you might with a camera?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, it was funny. I think at some point where the subject was something that was very definitely picturesque, the idea was to simply enjoy the experience of sitting in the sun and enjoying a couple of hours drinking some wine. It became a way of possessing the experience in a manner that, I suppose, really only drawing and painting can provide. You can take a photograph of something but you never possess it because it's too fast its spontaneous – you've got a souvenir of it, so what, you haven't made any connection with it. If you sit and look at it for a couple of hours, I suppose just meditating on it, you certainly soak the thing in. But there's something that's very intense about the experience of sitting down and having to look at it in the way that you do in order to make a drawing, or to make a painting of it in the sense of what visually goes on. By the time you've done that for a couple of hours you feel that you're really understood what you were looking at and also that you're left a little of yourself there. Somehow it becomes a way of – like I say – of possessing the experience in a way that no other manner seems to be able to quite do. A lot of the drawings were really that kind of thing. I call them "postcards," they're postcards in that sense; they're a way of just owning the experience a little differently. So I wasn't really – I knew that those were not meant to be art in any serious way, because the whole

thing was too corny, and I deliberately would set out to do drawings that were of famous settings like St. Mark's square and so on, because it seemed like that was what one should do. I didn't deliberately set out to find really obscure corners of a place that would be artistically interesting, that one could make serious art out of it. In fact, I think, I was aware even then that there was no point as an American to making, or to thinking that one could make a serious art statement about places like Paris and Venice and so on. It was painted so much and tromped over by the tourists and so on that there was no way that it could be dealt with other than as a tourist, and so I was quite aware of that whole thing. The things that were done inside, and I suppose that's one of the reasons they were done, became a little bit more serious. If I did a drawing of a box of corn flakes on a table with a couple of dishes, or a couple of oranges or whatever, or drawing a TV set that might be in the room, those things were thought more of as being potentially serious art.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, then you came back to California, back to Oakland - at that point?

ROBERT BECHTLE: I guess back to Alameda.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Apparently your eyes were opened to a certain extent to seeing your own environment that in which you grew up in a different way, looking at genre details of the physical environment - it's like a different way after this experience in Europe. At what point did you realize the direction in which you were being led in terms of fine art rather than just exercises or souvenirs, in terms of your career?

ROBERT BECHTLE: I guess it started to come together really early, soon after that. It was 1962, I guess when I got back, late 1962, and during the first part of 1963 I did a lot of lithographs which sort of picked up stylistically where I had stopped before going to Europe. They were fairly - started to be fairly expressionistic, but they very quickly tightened up and the paintings were really sort of floundering. I had no real idea of where I wanted the paintings to go and that is when I backed off and started doing these pieces that were really meant to be studies. I'd have somebody pose for me, or set up a still life, a table and so on. I'd tried, in effect, to see if I couldn't do what I had been doing in Europe, but it had to do with oil paint and on the larger scale and so on. So that went on through most of 1963 and I think towards - by the fall of 1963 I was beginning to think that there might be some possibility in taking that kind of a stance, and I was thinking of ways in which I could use a fairly realistic style to do what I felt had to be contemporary painting. The problem that one had to grapple with at that point was that a realistic style in art had been seen as being old fashioned and not having anything to do with modern art. You know, it was something that had to do with the past, or if it was still going on, it was only done by someone who was basically a conservative who didn't want to let go of the past and so on. It was just beginning to sift through, to me, at that point, that maybe there was a way of having it both ways, that one could make use of the realistic style to function with modern context. So in 1963 I was beginning to put that together. I was doing some paintings in which a wall with a window or a doorway would be used as a format so that the wall in effect would establish a flat surface on the picture plane and then the doorway and things that were on the wall, pictures, mirrors or whatever would establish fairly formal shapes that were put into relationship, almost like a collage, kind of like a Motherwell painting would do, only the shapes which were representative of a window plus things outside the window, or the mirror plus things in there and so on.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And this would be works from around 1965?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, it started in 1963 and went through 1964 - it tended to have that, although there were other things which were a little more straightforward, things that bent back and dealt with the spatial things a little bit more, but it seemed that it was a transitional kind of experience to go through those. They were all interior paintings with the exception of maybe a view out the window, but basically it was an aspect of that kind of inward turning trying to not be concerned too much with what was going on outside of the studio.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Was there a, shall we say seminal or key work that carried you to that point, or was it something that grew quite naturally? Can you think of any particular work that you would say stands at the beginning of the new interest?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, yes, there's one - actually there are two paintings that were done in 1963 that kind of represented, I guess, the transition. The first of them was done - it was a painting called Nancy Reading, I guess, and it was my wife posed at the dining room table and there are some articles on the table. It was a night scene with - by artificial light, the windows behind the table are very black and it reflected myself - it's a self portrait. Then there was, I guess, part of the interior reflected in the windows and that was done essentially with that idea of: "Well, let's see if we could do this." It was not really meant to be seen by anybody as a serious painting. Shortly after that, as that painting progressed and reached a point where I began to see that I could do it technically and it was beginning to work, I stopped working on it and I started another painting which I had. It was called '53 Plymouth, and it was - maybe a fifty-nine Plymouth. Anyway, the car was a rather minor point, a minor part of the painting, but basically I had hung a mirror on the wall next to the window for the type of format that I was talking about --

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: The '56 Plymouth.

ROBERT BECHTLE: The '56 Plymouth, and so there was a picture hanging – a painting hanging on the wall, a framed drawing which my self portrait was reflected in the glass of it – and then there was a mirror hanging next to it and the other part of my face was reflected in that, then the window next to that, and through the window you could see outside to the house and so on. And that painting was sort of a serious attempt to make something that might be able to function as a public piece of art rather than something which was just a study. Between those two paintings, I guess, was really the crucial, kind of pivotal point. Then part of that latter painting that included the car and the houses across the street, also was very pivotal, because that was – it was purely accidental the car was included. Originally the painting had a curtain hanging across that part of the window and the curtain didn't really work graphically. The shape was not right, you know, for that corner of the painting; it tended to break it up too much. It was a café curtain so you could see things over the top of it and then there was a white shape below, so since it wasn't working I took the curtains off the window and painted what happened to be out there which was the automobile.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How fortuitous.

ROBERT BECHTLE: And the automobile was fun to paint because immediately I got caught up with the idea, the challenge, of not painting it so it just looked like a car, but trying to make it look like it was a fifty-six Plymouth. It was specifically a certain kind of car and there were certain characteristic shapes that it had and so on. So that led directly to doing a subsequent painting in which I used the same window minus the curtains and parked my own car directly outside and did a portrait of the car as a still life thing. And so by --

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Which one was that?

ROBERT BECHTLE: That one was called '61 Pontiac. I don't know whether that's in that catalogue or not. I don't think it is.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: There's a '61 Pontiac but it's later --

ROBERT BECHTLE: That's the later version of it. I did several paintings in which that car --

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, so the automobile with which, to a certain extent, you've become associated, really came into your line of vision by accident simply by removing a window shade and including this little vignette out the window.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Quite by accident; things happen that way. Although, you know, it's funny, after doing that, sometime later, I remember going back through notes that I had made while I was in Europe and that included commentaries on possible things that one could do as paintings, and they were comments about, you know, paint automobiles with, make them very specific as to year and make and all that, and I remember doing while I was in Europe, doing those chalk drawings in addition to the things which were recording what was going on there. There were also things that were just imaginary, and those included some drawings of automobiles and billboards and airplanes and things that tended to go in that direction. So there was precedent for it, although at the time that I painted the car across the street, I had forgotten that I had written some of that stuff down.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I'm sure you've been asked this numerous times, but I think I have to ask it again anyway, and since we're talking about automobiles, representation of cars in your work, is there a particular iconography in connection with the automobile that you could describe; for you any special symbolic meaning, or is it simply what you see, a very straightforward selection of an object in one's mind.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, I tend to see it as being very straightforward. I really see it as being still life objects in a sense. That there are things which are a very important part of our life and as an object, probably the most important and ubiquitous part of our – the way we live – especially in California. So its – I have very funny feelings about painting in that sense, because I realize that there are a lot of symbolic overtones that get attached to it, and you can't pretend that they're not there, and in choosing automobiles to paint, the choice is usually made in a way that makes use of those overtones in a way that may challenge the way that you usually think about it. In other words, it's like most of the cars that I've included in paintings almost without exception of recent but not totally new vintage, cars which obviously have been used as family cars and so on. I generally tended to reject cars which were too flamboyant, although obviously there are paintings that include thunderbirds and Cadillacs and so on; and in choosing those, they had a certain meaning for me that a certain kind of people would buy those as opposed to, say, buying a Chevrolet. But within that milieu anyway there was a certain pushing it towards that kind of a very middle class attitude towards the automobile as opposed to being interested in racing cars or sports cars or vintage cars, or anything which smacked too much of being exotic.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: In connection with the automobile, your selection of that as a still life subject, you really

intend no comment whatsoever. In fact, I gather that this would describe your relationship to your work, anyway: a neutrality, an objectivity.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, yes. Maybe too much is made of that whole neutrality idea that's a basic tenant of Realism that the artist tends to remove himself, at least from an editorializing position and lets things sort of speak for themselves, but it's never totally neutral – it can't be. The choices that art made are maybe a bit more pushing the viewer in a little more subtle way than the artists who are trying to make it a more overt kind of commentary. A lot of the thinking that I'll do in choosing an image has to do with not only to visual grammar that seems to be happening there, this relationship of parts and so on, what's happening with the light with the way the shapes function and so on, but also the type of architecture that's involved, some architecture which is suitably nondescript. I mean that is a choice to make it that way; one could choose something else, you know, so it's to choose the architecture in such a way that it seems to be very neutral. It's not a neutral choice, it's a choice which is very pointed. In choosing the combination of the architecture plus the vehicle, the vehicle also has to be pointedly nondescript, in other words, like a Buick station wagon in front of a stucco or tract type house is a very pointed combination and actually quite different from, say, choosing to paint a Jaguar parked in front of a very handsome contemporary Berkeley redwood house, which would also have a commentary element perhaps, but it would have a totally different look in terms of a painting. I suppose one of the reasons for having these things be more nondescript is that it allows the objects to function maybe a little more like bottles and oranges and so on – to function as a still life. They become a little bit more like what we're used to seeing and therefore there's nothing particularly remarkable about them and therefore you can think about them in any way you want rather than having something be laid on you by myself as to how are you supposed to be responding to these things.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Something just occurred to me in connection with that goal or objective in your painting or in the New Realism. The objects that are selected, the material images that are selected are supposed to be familiar objects from our lives, but of course if the painting itself were displayed in another society, they all of a sudden would become very much unfamiliar and very exotic; which then, it occurs to me, would change the meaning dramatically of the work of art.

ROBERT BECHTLE: I suppose it does. There's nothing you can do about that.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: No, no, I realize that, but to the extent that it's important that these things be very mundane or very common aspects of our life.

ROBERT BECHTLE: It's important to be, I think, in terms of making the art, and how they're read is less important because, in fact, it's – I find it rather fascinating that they can be read in different ways by different people who bring their own attitudes towards things and interpret what seems to me to be a very straightforward image in rather widely different ways. I find that, as I say, interesting, and also rather good that it's possible, but the connection with what is familiar is important, really just to me, as the person who makes the work and not necessarily – I don't know if it's that important to someone who – who --

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So that doesn't carry the meaning then, that's not the content of the painting?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Not specifically, you know. To someone who is also familiar with these things, then they're going to respond to them in a different way, and perhaps in a way closer to the way I respond to them than someone who grew up in another part of the world.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Of course, the whole world is becoming like California, we're told.

ROBERT BECHTLE: That's – yes. That's what I hear. Too bad.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: In some ways.

ROBERT BECHTLE: In some ways.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about the series of self portraits you did, oh, I think 1961-1963, those years, what's the importance of that particular activity to the emergence of an awareness of this realist style as something you wanted to pursue? The direction that you wanted to pursue.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, they started by being just simply a way of having a handy model. I think that's how most artists start doing that, and so they become, I suppose by an extension of that, a rather severe test of your ability to observe and process information that you see. They're really not that different than doing paintings that – paintings of cars, paintings of other people, except of course, that the fact that you're painting yourself is that your observation is tuned in a way that is obviously much more introspective and much more critical of what you're doing. It's a very intimate kind of thing, the way that painting something outside of yourself from a photograph is a different experience than painting yourself looking in a mirror.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It's very interesting. I'm looking now at the catalogue of your retrospective exhibition of 1973 and just looking at some of the plates. The thing that strikes me in connection with the self portraits - the earliest one I see here is 1961, which is very painterly effort. It reminds me of something that would come out of the Bay Area Figurative mode, then in 1963 there's another one here reproduced on the same page which is already becoming tighter, more literal. Then I look here at examples from 1963 - the *Oval Mirror I*, and then 1964, *Oval Mirror II*, and then, again on the opposite page, *Cookie Jar* in 1964. That's, I guess, you standing actually you're only about - the top part of your face is removed, and it's maybe your torso, legs, showing in this mirror. But the point is this, and it's not a very profound observation on my part. You moved quite a distance in terms - towards a much more literal and objective type style through this series. Maybe it's just a use, to be used as a kind of measure, a degree as you go along rather than being some crucial line of development.

ROBERT BECHTLE: The thing that I've discovered in looking back at work is that things tend to fall into sequences like that series where a certain subject or use of the subject gets reused many times, not at rather widely separated times to that that sense of seeing the idea evolve, as you were talking about with the self portraits, can be seen in these other series. They weren't meant to be series when they started out. I wasn't thinking, "Well, now I'm going to do a series of painting of this happening," but in retrospect I can really break things down into a number of sequences like that in which you can see the evolution of a way of seeing take place, and I suppose in some sense that is as much what the art is about as anything else. The sense of style that has evolved can be measured through these different progressions, and the relationship of style, painting style, to evolution is a lot of what the paintings are about. The thing that I was talking about earlier, the Bay Area Figurative style and the need to get away from that, was a realization on my part that I was feeling captive of the style of art which I was sympathetic with, which I enjoyed, but which basically was that of other people. I was very conscious in doing my paintings how other people's looked. It's almost like you'd have them looking over your shoulder. It's very perhaps, more than I should have been, but I was very aware of that whole problem and the use of a very objective and realistic style became a way of, in effect, discarding style. It was a way of - just say that Realism seemed like a way of having no style at all, it was a way of freeing myself from the need to even think about that, to be concerned with what seemed to be more basic problems of seeing, and then letting the kinds of marks that would be made be based on observation and interpretation thereof rather than being conscious of the way the marks looked as so often happens when you're overly concerned with style. In a sense, it was choosing Realism as a non-style.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You have been known to say that you're interested in eliminating - at least, minimizing - the hand of the artist, the evidence of artistic choice in terms of composition, in terms of style as you were saying, perhaps color relationships - these things that are imposed, traditionally, typically, in painting, and at one point you said that this is not what your paintings are about, and that's a quote, I think, from a statement you made in the introduction to this catalogue. Could you expand on that? The question being, of course, then why are they?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Of course, I made that statement five years ago.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: This is very unfair. We can use it as a point of departure.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, in a sense, it goes back to what I was saying about realism as a kind of non-style. What it basically is, is putting the emphasis in a slightly different way, so that the kinds of choices that a painter makes, has to make about color and about shape and so on, are still being made, and in some cases they are very important things. Sometimes I'll choose to do a particular painting simply because I like certain things that are happening with the color, or a certain thing that's happening with the shape of a building or so on, but by doing it in a style which is very descriptive when someone looks at the painting, what they see, then, is the object depicted, and the manipulations that I might have made in terms of choosing things are hidden behind the description. So rather than being sort of hit over the head with it, and there's nothing wrong with that, it's just simply that so much of modern art has been about that and it's very difficult to find space in there in which you can be yourself without all of a sudden bumping into some other artist who did it perhaps much better than you, and so the description, in a sense, becomes a way of achieving a certain freedom to be yourself, but it's also, a way of hiding from that particular problem. If you're being fairly objective, you know that the sky is basically going to be blue and then so the decision is to just exactly how blue is going to be becomes very important, where if you're a much more - much freer kind of painting, the sky can be any color you want it to be, and then the choice is whether it's going to be green or red or blue is important, so it simply changes the context of the decision, but it allows, getting back to what we were talking about earlier, by keeping those kinds of questions in a more downplayed manner, it allows the subject matter to come through in a way that it become dominant. Then these questions about what the subject matter represents, or how the viewer might respond to the subject matter, all those things are allowed to sort of have full play because the context is so basically noncommittal in terms of forcing you to think one way or another about it at least the area of interpretation by the viewer is very open I find it very, you know, rather fascinating.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you feel you're depriving yourself at all by giving up these choices, you know,

consciously. It's a conscious sacrifice of a broader range of choices, perhaps even the opportunity to comment; they used to say "express yourself" in a more clear fashion. Do you feel there's any loss there as an artist?

ROBERT BECHTLE: No, not really, because on the other hand I see these as being very personal things and therefore as being self expression, and so that's not really an issue. And also, I think one drifts rather naturally towards what one can do so well and so in trying to paint in the manner of the artists that I admired before, like Diebenkorn and so on, I was always aware that I really could not do that that well and so I have no desire now to try and go back and do that, because I realize that what I'm doing now is something that I can do well and I can make it work for me. So rather than feeling that I have given up something, I feel like I've gained some space to operate in and that freedom is extremely important, I think.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, maybe now would be a good moment to move on to another very much related question and that is the whole subject of New Realism, and of course there are a number of specific points that might fall under that. First of all, do you want to comment or briefly describe your view of the development of the New Realism lineage, perhaps, there might be another term one could use. Where does it come from?

ROBERT BECHTLE: I suppose the easiest way to deal with it is just say there were at the same time that I was doing, going through that particular backing into a kind of stylistic evolution, the same thing was happening with other people for different reasons, perhaps; but basically the same kind of search for some room in which to operate and to get away from the problem of how their paintings looked like other people's paintings. Various individuals who like other people's paintings. Various individuals who felt for whatever reasons that painting the realistic, objective image was a possibility to be explored; and this took place in different parts of the country, really, at the same time without any knowledge from one artist of what the other artist was doing, and so - probably the most public artist at that point was Malcolm Morley whose earliest pieces could be described as New Realism occurred I guess around 1964, 1963-1964, somewhere in there. I remember seeing black and white photographs of some of his paintings in the art magazines back about 1964-65, so I was aware of his stuff at that point, but I think I was already far enough along with what was happening with my own work that I saw it as kind of - like an interesting curiosity. In other words, here was another artist that seemed to be doing some kind of interesting - I could see his stuff relating very strongly to Pop.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I was going to ask you about that.

ROBERT BECHTLE: The root was there. I think that New Realism holds a very strong connection to Pop art, and with Morley's paintings of ocean liners you could sort of make that connection more closely than I was thinking of in my own work, although I'd certainly acknowledge the connection in my work too. Morley was painting these things of the ocean liners that were very obviously and pointedly deprived not from the ocean liners themselves, but from the travel posters and photographs on calendars and so those were just a short step from Pop painting being influenced by advertising to paintings from calendars. But the other artists, certainly people out here on the Coast, I think of McLean, and Cottingham, sort of went through a similar evolution to what I went through - being very strongly influenced by the Bay Area Figurative thing and in a sense sort of tightening that up, taking it in a direction that it had the potential to go and sort of tightening it up and gradually becoming more and more interested in the way things look. Some of the Eastern artists have talked about similar kinds of - Chuck Close, for example. He started painting big portraits as a way of not having to think about the kinds of marks he was making, not having to make what he called "beautiful marks." You know, he said he was - became very adept at it, he could make paintings which were about marks, abstract paintings; and he felt that by tying the image into something by which he could check his accuracy - the marks had to - couldn't be random marks any more, they had a function and therefore it became an intellectual discipline to be able to structure them. So in a sense, it was a similar kind of journey that he was making. And I think it's true in one way or another of a lot of these artists.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So, somehow, I get from what you say a Realist style emerged at a certain time as an alternative, really, for several artists.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, I think that's basically --

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: A way to escape certain influences that had been important on it. You mentioned this connection with Pop art which, I suppose, may be obvious, but on the other hand I don't want to assume that's the case, the connection between Pop and New Realism.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, the connections are on a lot of levels. One is, the most obvious is the subject matter level in which most of the subject matter in the Realist painting has been a kind of middle class either suburban or urban landscape and that is just a small step from advertising, commercial products, and that sort of thing. So I think that Pop art really provided the - it was a catalyst to look in that area and it sort of provided the proper atmosphere to be able to respond to those kinds of subject matters. But it also technically provided an excuse, maybe, to work that way, because prior to Pop art American art had been essentially, or American



abstract art anyway had been essentially an Expressionist statement and even though there was a whole lineage of abstract painters who were working in a Precisionist technique, basically, the mainstream, anyway what was handed down in the schools and so on, was basically an Expressionist thing. Also, Pop art comes along and okays the subject and makes a rather interesting use of subject matter, including subject matter you never thought of as having anything to do with art. It makes use of what were basically commercial art techniques: airbrushes, masking, very flat surfaces, fine renderings and so on, the kind of techniques that designers and illustrators had been using but which were not considered valid fine art expression and all of a sudden here it's being used as a fine art – in the fine context and so, again, it becomes just a small step to say why not use a realistic rendering technique as the traditional illustrators have used to make paintings, going back to Norman Rockwell for your technique rather than to more contemporary designer techniques. It was like getting permission to start looking there and being able to look there was like opening a door into a big empty room, you know, what are we going to find. Even though this was a very traditional technique, none of us had really been trained in it, so we had to discover it for ourselves, and none of us had any particular sympathy with the old Realist tradition, we weren't really coming out of that, that was all old fashion. We didn't think about it, really. And so it was like being let loose in this place that had to be explored and somehow – you know, in which you literally had to create the means of making the paintings themselves. You had to trust your, what art school experience you had, you had to trust your eye. I started looking at older pieces that used these techniques to see what I could learn from it, but it was basically a very exciting kind of learning experience.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: There seems to be, as well as the similarities, some profound fundamental differences between Pop art and New Realism. I'm sure you don't think of yourself in any way as a Pop artist, even though at one point, I suppose, it's possible to those who would look at your work and say, "automobile in suburban setting, this is some sort of Pop statement." What do you see as the important sense that separates New Realism from Pop art? Might it have something to do with the comment or a comment upon the artist perhaps as a satirical element?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes. Well, I think there is a certain satirical element that is present in Pop art although they tend to make too much of that. Basically, I guess, it has to do with the source, and Pop art although they tend to make too much of that. Basically, I guess, it has to do with the source, and Pop art really was based on advertising and commercial imagery as a source, and then make use of that in various individual ways. Where New Realism is based, I suppose, on just real life in a sense, as a source. In other words, it's almost like saying that Pop art is based on the images as the advertisers would have us believe life is about, where New Realism is based on maybe the same things but as they are actually used and as they are actually seen and as they actually take place. So an automobile occurs in Pop art imagery, occasionally you'll see it in Rosenquist's paintings, some of the early Wesselman things had it, and Oldenburg did some things with automobiles, but almost invariably the connection to them is the image of the automobile and not the automobile itself. It's the image on the billboard or the image in the advertisement that you make the connection with.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: On the other side we were talking about the connection between New Realism and Pop art, and then also you pointed out some very important differences. You also made the statement again which you made before that none of the New Realists, certainly not you, came out of the of Realist tradition, and by that, I mean what was often pointed to as the native American tradition of Realism in painting which I suppose could be argued with; but you know, it's something that's been pointed to for quite some time and it's one of the ways that – supposedly one of the identifying characteristics of much of American painting up to the modern period, and certainly some of the most distinguished figures, and some that are the history of art by now, and some that you've mentioned that you admire. I think Hopper was certainly one of them. At any rate, I'd be very interested to know how you feel the New Realism is separated, is perhaps not a continuation of the American Realist tradition. What are the differences?

ROBERT BECHTLE: I'm not so sure that it is now. I think when we talked about it as not really growing out of that, what I meant was that that particular tradition, as I see it anyway, as it came down through the 1930's and then into the 1940's was largely supplanted in terms of energy by the abstract, the kind of amalgamation of both American and European ideas that took place with Abstract Expressionism and so on, and that that, in turn, started a new kind of continuum. It's kind of tempting to see things as having those simple connections – it was much more complex than that. When we were at school, that 1930s, you know 1920s, 1930s, early 1940s tradition still existed but it was very watered down at that point and largely – the people who were largely involved in it were people who tended to be anti-modern art and they saw it as a refuge. I think that the New Realists have tended to see themselves as coming out of a modern art tradition having to do with Pop art, having connections, however tenuous, with Abstract Expressionism and not this watered down tradition of the 1930s. Once this style had established itself, once it had come into being and people had seen what other artists were doing, they realized that there was a kind of pattern to what was going on, then you began to fit it into place and see that it really did have some kind of connection – not with the watered down tradition as it existed while we were in school, but with the mainstream. You could trace connections with people like Hopper, Eakins and so on, even though you figured that they probably wouldn't approve of what we were doing. Nevertheless, you could start making a kind of kinship with those people. You could do it by going back and reestablishing it

rather than seeing yourself as the continuation of it. I don't know whether that makes sense. In other words, instead of seeing ourselves as guardians of this old tradition against the onslaught of modern art, it was almost like saying, "this has to do with modern art," and then in retrospect you can say, "Gee, we really do have something to do with this other stuff too," and this becomes another facet, perhaps, of this rather long native American tradition.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, I see what you're saying it has to do with your own feeling of roots or background as an artist. You grew up in a certain generation where you were exposed to certain trends, certain styles, certain modern masters, and this is basically where you're coming from; and that you certainly didn't start out to participate in an older American tradition. But now that you have a little more of perspective on it, do you find yourself viewing some of the older American Realists in a different light? One would think that would be the case.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, very much so.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And which ones come to mind? Which ones have offered perhaps some surprises for you?

ROBERT BECHTLE: I'm continually discovering people that I either didn't know about or else people that I'd known about for years but just wasn't interested in looking at, and am finding new pleasure in seeing them. Someone who comes to mind immediately in that respect is Reginald Marsh, someone that I'm just getting turned on to now. He was sort of a hero of those people that I was putting down a little while ago, the tail end of that Realist tradition, I think he was one of their heroes in the 1940's-1950's. But certainly Hopper is someone that I really thought very, that I really enjoyed a lot and am re-establishing a kind of connection there. People like Homer and so on, Sheeler --

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You gave a lecture some time ago over at the Legion of Honor and talked a little bit about -- well, actually, quite a bit -- about some earlier figures you admired who participated in this tradition. You remember that it was based on looking at images or works in the Achenbach collection and then selecting those to which you had a certain response. That interested me very much, in fact, I took notes on that and listed some of these names -- people like Grant Wood, Reginald Marsh, you mentioned, but then people like John Taylor Arms, somebody I don't think I've ever heard of, Wengenroth.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Oh yes, he's rather obscure.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yes, I'd never heard of him before, but for some reason you had come across him. Charles Meredith -- I thought that was interesting, and other figures of course, Hopper and Homer. I don't intend to sit here and read them off the list to the tape, but it's an interesting array of names. Do you see any particular qualities that would run, if not through all of these, the work of all these figures, at least some of them, that would attract you? Art you able to identify a quality?

ROBERT BECHTLE: It seems maybe rather obvious to say that the thing that seems to run through them is a characteristic kind of honesty and basic straightforwardness. In other words, a suppression of style in the European sense towards observation and response to environment and to one's own vision. It's not to say that European art is dishonest, that's not the point. Actually the same characteristic exists, I think, in a lot of European art. In fact, it's one of the characteristics of, I suppose, Realism in general, is that sense of responding to the information and doing so in as simple and direct a way as possible in hopes that something a little bit more than that is going to come out of it. Basically, that's the thread that ties a lot of these American works together, it's simply a kind of honest configuration with what's there. And you can certainly tie that to French painters, starting with Courbet, anyway, who were dealing with essentially the same kinds of things. That's what Impressionism was basically about, there's a certain response, and they had evolved certain techniques and a certain style of work which is quite different from what we're doing, but in terms of the subject matter and in terms of the attitudes towards what they were seeing basically it is the same thing. That thread, I suppose, runs through all these people, the ones that you mentioned, and then other people whose work I respond to a lot -- people like Degas, Manet and so on. They had some of that same thread running through them.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Is there anything in the style of somebody like Grant Wood, let's say, who has not enjoyed the -- hasn't inspired the greatest affection among art historians, necessarily, but, that may be changing. Anyway, is there something in the style there as well as an honesty towards objects?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, probably all art has style. Sometimes they style gets in the way of seeing what the artist is really saying, and I think that some of Grant Wood's things had that take place, where that kind of stylized treatment that he used, sort of simplifying forms, tended to look old fashioned at a certain point. It was like a style which went out of style. It seemed to much a part of the 1930's and that was supplanted by other aspects -- his stuff looked terribly old fashioned, but we've got a distance on it now, and we begin to realize that we can see beyond that style and see that there's something else going on there that had a little bit more to say as being current and so on. A lot of his stuff really sort of puts me off, because it has that overly stylized quality;

but the more, the simpler things – I think one of those slides I showed you the lithograph of the Comstocks which is a very corny thing with foot tracks coming out in the snow and so on. There's something kind of – just the skill with which it was rendered, this obsessive kind of mark that he was making. That alone, somehow, seemed to give it a kind of energy that took it beyond the corniness that seemed to be a part of it.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How would you describe your relationship to predecessors, if I may call them that, in America, like Homer and Eakins, and what would you perhaps point out as differences. Again, in terms of concern to the extent that obviously you're able to see through their work? Is that something that you'll have to sleep on?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, I guess. I suppose in some ways I can make a connection with Eakins more than I can with Homer even though I prefer looking at Homer.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Why is that?

ROBERT BECHTLE: But even there, there's a difference. A lot of what Eakins is about is an almost obsessive kind of honesty. I'm not so sure that I'm that obsessed, or that honest. It's hard to think of yourself in those terms. I admire Homer's love. In both cases there's a kind of basic honesty. Homer's things, just in terms of skill are much more, in a sense – it's strange to say this, but I think he is a much more skillful painter than Eakins, certainly in watercolors that was the case, and Eakins obviously was a skillful painter; but when you look at those Homer watercolors, you just drop your teeth.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: The facility.

ROBERT BECHTLE: That goes beyond just mere facility; you're amazed at not only the skill involved but the depth of the feeling he was able to put into those things. In effect, he invented I suppose, the American watercolor technique. I love looking at them, but I don't aspire to be able to paint that way particularly, whereas I think I could aspire to paint like Eakins – to aspire to it, but not necessarily going to get there. It seems like a reasonable – relatively reasonable aspiration whereas the Homer things somehow are just like magic.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about the matter of subjectivity, or relative subjectivity with those two artists, the presence of emotion, the presence of the artist's feelings in the works themselves which is something that I gather – I'm not totally sure New Realism is trying to eschew, trying to avoid as much as possible. How would you describe either of those artists in terms of that?

ROBERT BECHTLE: It seems like Eakins, again, would be closer to the kind of attitude that the New Realist artists have. The emotion is held in check to a large extent by a kind of objectivity, and I think that there is a more upfront emotional content. In some cases it's very pointed, you know, that certain story telling pieces – where the story is meant to sort of tug at your heart strings. The most obvious example, I guess, is the famous one *The Gulf Stream*. [by Winslow Homer] --

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Anecdotal?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, anecdotal. There's a really beautiful one of a fox and a bird, it's almost Japanese in its abstraction and yet the message behind it is still rather straightforward. The strongest ones of them are simply portraits of people he felt very close to.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But what about that quality. I was thinking in this connection of the portraits, the evident – well as you said, people he's very close to – evident affection, I think, in many cases, certainly very honest, but charged with a subjectivity that I gather is not something that the New Realists are seeking. This I guess, is what I'm getting at.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, except that I think that it's a little deceptive because even though one doesn't seek it, it still exists and so --

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well you, for instance, use your family, although you say it shouldn't matter. I guess in many of your paintings family members are the models.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, it shouldn't matter to someone else that's the point. Someone looking at the painting. It shouldn't make a difference who the people are, but to me it matters.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I'm glad to hear that.

ROBERT BECHTLE: I think that's one of the qualities that you get out of the Eakins paintings, and that's why they go beyond just simply being portraits in the sense of just simply telling how somebody looked. They become a much deeper kind of portrait than that, because the artist is obviously putting something of himself into it and some of the confrontation between the artist and the person who is being portrayed becomes a part of the

energy of the painting that you get when you look at it. I think that for me to use my family or people I know in paintings is basically the same thing, it has the same purpose. It's a way that I can establish a relationship with what's going on in the painting in a way that is deeper and richer than if they were simply strangers, types, or whatever. I find that very important. Now other artists who also work with figures, McLean for example, doesn't see that as being particularly important. He'd just as soon not have the people included in the paintings. But I think that a certain - that's one of the paradoxes of Realism in general is that the more the artist is able to seemingly divorce himself from editorializing, the more a kind of intimate relationship can be established with the painting proves so that that kind of energy comes through. An almost obsessive fascination with detail or with the particular syntax that's necessary to make the image come together - the way you paint a tree, the way you paint the grass, or whatever - that obsessiveness starts - becomes in its own way a kind of intimate connection with painting and when a painting is successful that becomes a really important aspect of it. It sounds paradoxical that that would take place because it seems like the more you get involved with simply recording information, the less there would be of yourself in it, but I think it's almost - it's like a trance-like state that takes place. It sounds silly, but it's not that different, I think, than what an Abstract Expressionist painter is attempting to establish in the - an action painter, anyway, where the action of painting starts to induce a kind of action/reaction with the materials of the painting that charges the image, the shapes in the painting with a certain energy that goes beyond just simply a formal arrangement of marks. If that can take place in a very realistic painting by becoming obsessed with the way it's produced within these small sections, it's almost like painting - if you paint a section of grass you're concentrating on painting and you become totally lost in the process, so it becomes not just simply a matter of rendering surfaces so that they look like what they're supposed to look like, but where the manipulation of the paint starts to become what the painting is about at that particular point. Does that make sense? I'm sorry it's very strange. But a lot of that really comes out of sort of Abstract Expressionist background.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's interesting. You keep turning back to action painting, Abstract Expressionism, and yet in some respects, I think one could see more formality in the New Realism, if there was a connection to be made, it might be with post-painterly abstraction considerations. It's hard to find words to say exactly what I'm getting at, but the one, again, is a very subjective, very emotional experience, or at least we seem to perceive it that way, whereas the other is much more concerned with problems of structure, problems of composition, and there's a quietness to much new realist painting or at least I see it, it suggests this - it's a real formal thing. Is that right, do you see what I mean?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, I think it is, It's a mistake to try and make these connections too tightly, because they obviously exist with their own particular borders and so on and there are certain connections that are spiritually there with other kinds of change but it's not really like them and so it's a mistake to try and pin it down too closely. You're right because there's a lot of - there's a much more direct relationship to what you're talking about, a precise kind of abstract painting than there is to the whole Abstract Expressionist type thing.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Is one of the things that you're after in your own work a dealing with these important formal issues or at least that you've been told were important through the sixties: the issues of Post-painterly Abstraction, the Greenbergian [Clement Greenberg] issues?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Flatness, and shape and so on? I guess not, really. The issues are there, but if one is really grappling with those issues then one would deal with it [inaudible] The thing that is first and foremost is the subject matter. You have to deal with that. You can't pretend that it's not there. And if you are not interested in dealing with that, then you should be dealing with a non-subject matter art. Obviously there are different degrees of how you deal with it, and if one is working with a very realistic thing, the subject matter is being brought out in such a way that say s, "Look, the subject matter is important," and it must be dealt with. It's part of the image. But in the relationship of the subject matter to the formal issues, you'll find a little tension is set up with them - between them - what is happening in terms of how you're chosen to set the painting up, in terms of its shape and color relationships, but then what's happening also in terms of the psychology that is there. What's happening between the figures, let's say, or what's happening between the figures, let's say, or what's happening between the figure and the viewer in a way those things interplay with the formal structure. That's what a figurative artist is about and it's a funny mix that doesn't allow it to - it's very slippery. You can't formulize it very easily.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well in your work there is a certain - what shall we say - classical quality, a certain order, that we tend to associate with Classicism. But even an elimination of detail contributes to a certain formal impact. I realize that you base your compositions on photographs, on slides especially, but nevertheless they have the feeling of a classical removal from time which has to do with certain compositional elements. Is this something that you're seeking, is this a device of yours?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, apparently it is, but it's very intuitive. The compositions or the particular images that I seem to respond to have that quality, and I like that quality. I like the other art as well as feeling that it is something that I want to try and achieve in my own.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But if you look at the '60 T-Bird for instance, it's really laid out on the vertical and horizontal. I can't imagine a much more schematic composition, which - and then the figure is standing there, I presume it's Robert Bechtle - is it not?

ROBERT BECHTLE: It's not, it's my brother.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Family resemblance. But at any rate, you even have there this famous classical triangle as a compositional element. At least, one could read it that way, it's very secure, very tied down, and not that this is the case in every picture, but it certainly can't be denied and obviously it's serving some end that you had in mind.

ROBERT BECHTLE: It goes back to what I was saying earlier about seeing this still life painting, that one of the elements that's very strong is that sense or need to establish the format or composition of the painting. I don't even like the word composition actually, that sort of implies that you are trying to set up an arrangement that is comfortable. I think the positioning involving the elements is much more crucial than that, that in many cases the - where the figure sits in the painting, very often it's in the center, that's a very classical kind of device, and various balances that are set up are thought about very consciously not necessarily always putting the figure in the center but, sometimes where the figures are to the side, and the center seems to be the kind of arena in which the figures interact because of the way they happen to be looking. There's a kind of psychology that starts to take place within the image, the way the figures seem to be thinking about each other or whatever. Somehow, sometimes the blank center of the painting will allow that to seem to be taking place, or where the use of diagonals, sometimes the shape of the table top tilted, the rectangle, the way the corner of the table approaches the edge of the rectangle, the way the corner of the table approaches the edge of the rectangle is very important. The shapes that are left over between the main shapes, the little triangular corner piece that might be left over between the edge of the table and the edge of the canvas are very important. I'm sitting here, I'm looking at this lithograph that's on the wall right now in which the shadow shape and the shape of the roof line repeat each other, and the two together make a dark diagonal slash that runs across the rectangle. I think it's pretty obvious that definitely means that it's been chosen as a formal device for structure in the painting, that that particular shape that is created by those two things is really what the painting - I'm not saying what the painting is about - but that's the thing that triggered making the position of the figure more or less in the center, and then balanced on either side by the car and by the shrubbery sort of formalizes what is basically a rather dynamic shape that runs diagonally across. So I suppose the figure in the center, the stillness of it; the figures caught in poses which are basically - they seem to be informal but they're informal in a way where the figure is obviously posing and is aware of the camera, aware of the viewer, so that that establishes a kind of formality, and that relationship between the informal, or casual snapshot quality and then this very formal kind of frontal relationship. It seems to me that it sets up a tension which is very important.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's interesting. I can see that, too. We've been talking about composition which is a word you prefer not to use, but nevertheless the tools, the devices, the methods that are used in building a picture, the kind of relationship to subjects strictly from a formal standpoint at least up to now. What I would like to talk about is that process, the physical process, your methods of building up a picture and the materials that you use, particularly in connection with the use of photographs and slides. That intermediate - what shall we say - step between reality, between the world around us, and then the painting itself.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, do you mean taking the photograph, or how we get from the photograph to the painting?

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, start from the beginning.

ROBERT BECHTLE: A logical place to start. Well photographs are taken, I suppose haphazardly. A lot of the time I will take a camera along in situations in which I think there's a possibility of getting a painting and will shoot things that seem appropriate, some figures. When you get all the slides back, you have to go through them, and maybe out of a batch of things you might get one that you can use, maybe nothing. It's just so chancy as to the precise grouping of all the elements, the attitude of the figures, the things that are happening with the light, and the shapes, and so on. It's all going to be together. And then sometimes, they are taken much more purposefully. I'll pose people specifically, or in the case of vehicles, architecture, you can be much more methodical about shooting it. A lot of times I'll deal with something that is - something that I pass often and have thought about photographing and maybe months later I'll finally get around to doing it. But the photographs are generally made with the idea of getting a painting from them, so in a sense it's like using the camera as a sketchbook, but then once the slides are in hand it becomes a kind of editing process of looking at these things rather carefully over a long period of time and gradually kind of sifting out the ones that you feel really have a gem of - can be carried on as a painting, and the percentage of things that one can do that is really very small. I take a lot of photographs in order to get one.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So then you select a photograph, for whatever reasons --

ROBERT BECHTLE: It's very hard to put one's finger on it, what quality, because in a sense a lot of the art takes place right there, just in choosing which one would be chosen. Certain things just have to click and it has to feel right; and to be able to say why this one feels right and another one doesn't, and it looks like identical things are happening in each I would be hard put to explain.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You use almost exclusively 35mm slides now. At one time did you work from - I believe you did in fact - work from black and white photographs.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes at one time, I was using black and white photographs and then they weren't terribly large, I wasn't getting enlargements made. At that time the whole process was fairly crude and my requirements as far as what I could see in the photograph weren't great, because I was interpreting them pretty broadly. They were relatively loosely painted compared to the more recent ones and then as I started using slides it became a problem just getting, seeing the slide while you were painting and there were various little devices that I used to be able to project the slide. Finally stopped doing that and for the last few years I've been getting prints made from the slide, fairly large color prints, 11 x 14. And color in the print is never as good as the slide, but it's adequate and somewhere between the two the color that starts to happen in the painting sort of presents itself. There are never - the paintings are never totally accurate as far as the color. In some cases it's just a matter of -

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Is that your own choice?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, generally. Sometimes it has to do with a very conscious choice where something in the slide or print doesn't quite ring true in terms of color and so it will screw it one way or the other and that tends to affect all the other colors in the painting; and sometimes it's just a matter of the painting starting to make its own direction. The little color decisions that get made where the color is slightly different from what is in the photograph and gradually that affects the rest of the painting and what you end up with is something that is actually different.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, you have the slide, then, for these mysterious reasons that slide is the one that has been selected. What's the next step? You say now you're having prints made, but --

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, yes. In terms of actually building the painting then the basic drawing for the painting, the outlines, is put on by projecting the slide onto the canvas and then tracing the outlines with just a pencil outline. It's like making a map. If there are any changes or corrections that need to be made in terms of perspective or editing things out, or maybe moving something, or whatever a lot of that takes place at that point.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you make adjustments, decisions at that time?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, it depends. Sometimes, no, I have no particular feelings about it one way or the other. I'll think about whether -- for instance, there are certain distortions that the camera makes, particularly if it's not held perfectly straight, the vertical tends to sort of slant towards the edges and so sometimes I'll take a T-square and straighten all those lines or sometimes not. It just depends what feels right for that particular painting, whether it wants to be trued up or not. You know, various little things like that. I don't feel that I have to make corrections in order to somehow impose my will over the thing but I don't object to making them if it seems like it's necessary. Each image has its own thing. And then the ...some parts of the painting particularly foliage which is always complicated to try and draw outlines around, because once you've done it you can't tell what the lines mean - I'll draw with paint, usually with some dark brown paint, in effect paint the dark spots so there's a light and dark pattern that indicates where the leaves are and where the spaces between the leaves are. I'll paint that directly into the projected image, just as a way of controlling those areas. Then once the drawing is essentially in place, then sometimes I'll start the painting by blocking in with brown paint, getting the darks established, knowing where all the large dark areas are. Some places will be left just in pencil outline and some places will have brown paint on them, and then some areas, particularly if painting the figures, will get developed in color in a very rough way that, in effect, obliterates all the outlines. That establishes the color relationships in that area ... so there's a chance to see the painting essentially as it's going to look when finished, in its rough form fairly early on. You get a chance to really feel the image. So then as the painting progresses, you're always able to see the new parts as a finish against the whole painting. If you were trying to paint the whole - finish one little area at a time, just filling in the outlines, you'd always be seeing the newly painted parts against, in effect, blank canvas and you never would be able to see what the whole painting's going to look like; so as a way of avoiding that, I'll under-paint in effect with brown for most of it and then with color in the parts where the color choices tend to be a little bit more crucial. And then once that's done, and that's a matter of maybe a couple of days or sometimes a couple of weeks depending on how complex it is, I'll start painting over that and painting it area by area finishing it as it goes along. I'll work on a face for as long as it seems necessary to get it finished to where it's as good as I think I can get it, then I'll stop and move on to an adjacent area and I'll work on that however long it takes to get it to where that seems finished, and then

proceed across the whole painting that way. So some areas are much more crucial and difficult in which the energy is more important, and then other areas it's like coasting. It's very mechanical: background areas, skies, sidewalks and that sort of thing, are very quick and very mechanical, not terribly difficult to paint; whereas things like faces, hands and so on, where it really becomes a question of getting those marks to sort of fall in the right place so that they suggest a face so that it looks like the person that it's supposed and gets the marks to have a certain integrity as painted marks rather than just a rendering of a face, becomes – that particular act then becomes more like that sort of thing... where I was referring to a kind of abstract expressionist relationship earlier, that's sort of where it all comes from... where it happens, where the painting starts to have a life of its own, through the days of painting sessions. Different things happen. Some days go very well, where it seems like the brush just falls into place. It's almost like you just can't make a bad mark – it happens very rarely. Other times it works quite the opposite, where you get it to a certain stage in the middle of the day where it looks terrible and you're ready to jam your brush through the canvas, but you keep fighting with it, and gradually you start to go in the right places. It's a very problematical thing. A lot of times people think that if you've drawn the image with the projector that you've solved all the drawing problems but people don't realize that as soon as you start to put paint over it you obliterate the drawing immediately and so as the painting progresses you have to redraw each part, and you have to redraw it in terms of paint as you're painting it. It's not just a numbers painting where once you fill in between the outlines it's finished.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, basically, what you are achieving is... relationships... has to do with relationships, I would imagine by projecting the image on there, it's a way of obviously projecting that photograph that a little slice of reality onto a canvas, onto a larger surface, and at the same time observing relationships rather than the details of what you're doing. I think, maybe this is where people get confused.

ROBERT BECHTLE: That is really where it's important, it establishes important relationships right off the bat and does so in a way that keeps you from having to struggle with them and perhaps in struggling with them not get them exactly correct in some cases, particularly with the automobiles where – one could sit down and draw from the actual automobile or have a photograph in your hand and draw from freehand. With a reasonable amount of skill, you can get it so that it looks pretty much the way it's supposed to, but in drawing it freehand there are always little decisions that you make, little inaccuracies that creep in, no matter how accurate a draftsman you are that are going to subtly affect the way that automobile looks. If you want it to absolutely look like that particular year and model of car so that it's simply accepted as being a Chrysler or whatever, it is there, then you want to eliminate whatever degree of interpretation that might creep in from drawing freehand, so the projector becomes the simplest and best way to do it – it speeds it up, but it also does a much better job so that those subtle proportional relationships that exist with an automobile are correct. And so if you project that then out over the whole painting it sort of does the same thing, it establishes exactly where a roofline would go, it establishes how big somebody's nose is, and all of those things in a much simpler way than you could do if you were to struggle to draw it out freehand.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: A great deal has been made of the photograph in connection with New Realism. The use of the photograph as a model itself rather than the objects that are represented in the photograph. In other words, the artist is painting a painting of a negative of a photograph or a slide whose image has a separate life or is separate from the objects that are represented. Certainly in reproducing, to a certain extent, the photograph you get, the cropped images, you can only show so much of the slice of reality that's been photographed. And so the paintings, of course, have this quality of the photograph which is nothing the New Realists invented, obviously. Degas did it, there's plenty of this... a nice, distinguished tradition there.

ROBERT BECHTLE: It's somewhat underground, but --

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: At any rate, what about this relationship of the painting to the photograph as a model in light of what I've said about really painting a picture of a photograph rather than – Is too much made of that?

ROBERT BECHTLE: No, not really. It's fairly complicated, I guess, because you can't work with a photograph without having that be a factor. You can't pretend that looking at a two-dimensional image is like looking at the real thing, it's not. The camera selects in some way and probably the things that the lens selects or the way that it selects is different than what you would do if you were actually in the presence of the things. But I tend to think of the photograph as a substitute for subjects, to see it as a sketchbook and use it in that sense. Where I know other artists are much more interested in the particular photographic qualities and are much more attuned to the idea of... than painting a picture of a photograph. That the particular little – they will often use the different depth of a field that the camera achieves, the particular kind of highlights on a certain thing as a very deliberate part of the painting rather than trying to tighten those up, they'll go the other way.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Which I gather is the way you went --

ROBERT BECHTLE: In other words, if something's out of focus, I'll try to put it in focus which is difficult not to do, but a lot of people like that tricky quality and they will deliberately court that in the photographs that they take.

They'll use lenses which will distort the perspective or use a depth of field in which there are things that are very close that are very much out of focus, and then they'll paint it so that fuzziness is a very much a part of the painting. I think Ben does that a lot, Bobby does it, and to some extent Chuck Close makes use of that kind of thin, It's just a matter of choice, and also it's a matter of emphasis because even if you're painting a picture of a photograph, the things that are pictured in the photograph are going to be important and are going to dominate. And vice versa, if you're doing - using a photograph as a tool in which the things depicted are most important, you still have to accept the fact that the camera is seeing it in a different way than you see it with your eye, and so you're stuck with the quality of a photograph to some extent. So it's just a matter of how you treat that, I suppose it's a mental game as much as anything else. I like to pretend that I'm looking at the real thing and try and use the photograph as a tool to help me remember what the real thing looked like rather than as an object in and of itself even though I know I can't do that.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Okay, why don't we stop for this time, anyway.

### THIRD SESSION

LOCATION: SUBJECT'S STUDIO, BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

DATE: FEBRUARY 1, 1980

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Last session we had was in December, 1978 and the one before was just a few months earlier, in September. So it's now been over a year since we talked, and it's asking to much for you to remember in detail everything we've covered. In the last session, though, the main categories we dealt with were a discussion of New Realism, Photorealism and its relationship to Pop Art, the American tradition, and things like that. And then we got into methodology, with your working methods, and with the role of photographs in your work, and a very specific step by step description of how you build your paintings. So that's where we left off. We moved along in a somewhat chronological, biographical way, and I don't think that we really got up to date in that respect, so I would like to start by trying to tie up loose ends and come pretty close to the present. In terms of biography, I know that in connection with teaching, we may have gotten you a job at San Francisco State. I'm not sure, but why don't we just start there, and you can tell me when you started, how the position came about, and something about the experience.

ROBERT BECHTLE: I started teaching there in the fall of 1968, I believe it was, or 1969. At any rate, it was the year that the strike took place.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: -- and [Samuel] Hayakawa --

ROBERT BECHTLE: -- Hayakawa and the whole bit. I think it was in the fall at State. At any rate, they had put in for a new tenure track position in painting that was given to the department --

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Tenure track?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, tenure track. I think up to that point they had four people teaching painting on tenure track and they managed to get another one. I don't know how many other people they looked at, and they must have looked at quite a few people - but anyway, they offered it to me. And I was at that point looking for a different teaching situation.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Just to refresh, where were you teaching?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, as we covered earlier, I started teaching at Arts and Crafts and I had sort of worked up through various rank stages there and I had tenure there and - I forget now - I think at that point I was either associate or maybe full professor in rank. But since I had gone to school there and had been associated with the school for so long, I was interested in trying other places. I had done some temporary things, replacing people who were on sabbatical at Berkeley in the design department, and then at Davis in the art department. There was a possibility at one point that a full-time permanent job would have come up at Davis, and that was right when Reagan came in and started his cutbacks at the University so a couple of promised positions that the art department was supposed to get didn't come through. The position at State came up and it sounded like it was worth trying.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well then you started out as professor of painting. You were teaching painting.

ROBERT BECHTLE: I was teaching painting. Well, I was teaching painting, drawing, and then also, since I had a background in lithography and had taught that at Arts and Crafts, I was also teaching that.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I see. You've really taught a good number of years. I forget exactly when you started, but you've been teaching pretty regularly from quite early on. I don't know what kind of gap there was in between - the army, of course, and I think you started teaching then shortly after your return.



ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, pretty shortly after.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How many years do you think you've been teaching?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, it wasn't all continuous, because there were a couple of places where I took leaves of absence, but it's been something like twenty-three years.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, that's what I was going to guess. Obviously by now, if you didn't like teaching, you would have discovered it. And I gather you do basically enjoy teaching and that you view it as - well, I would imagine more than just employment to produce income, although that's obviously important.

ROBERT BECHTLE: That's obviously one of the reasons.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Why don't you tell me how you feel about your teaching and about the - if you can generalize - the importance of teaching for an artist, perhaps the benefits that can be derived from this sort of contact.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, it's a mixed blessing. The academic life in a university is pretty satisfying. It's a nice way to live, really. Your time is very flexible, you're always dealing with new people, and things can have a kind of continuity, but every semester is different, and you're always dealing with a large number of people so that you're not just seeing the same faces all the time. So socially, it's a very neat thing to do. But professionally, for an artist, it's probably the one thing that you can do other than being in a position to actually support yourself with the proceeds of sale of work. It's about the one thing you can do that really gives you the space, both in terms of time and emotionally, to do your work. The two things jibe in a really nice way. The work is very important to the context of the teaching, and the teaching tends to help support the work although in some ways it is a drain. Teaching is an emotional kind of thing and so a lot of times it robs you of a certain amount of energy that could go into your work, but it sort of replaces it with that social energy that I think is necessary. It's necessary for me, anyway. I find when I'm working only, that I start getting very hermetic. I just lock myself up in the studio, and it's a big bother to go out to social engagements of any kind. I get very reclusive, and so teaching is a way of getting out of that kind of having a little more balance.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you find yourself becoming involved with your students, or say, emotionally involved (I don't mean in any way that may sound) where you really become very interested in an individual, perhaps because of the work, perhaps for other reasons. In other words, do you find yourself investing a considerable emotional energy through your teaching?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, that's one of the dangers of it, I think. It's very easy to sort of slip into that. You have to do a certain extent or you can't function well as a teacher without making some kind of emotional connection with the people that you're working with, and obviously there are going to be some people that you connect with more closely than others. Some are just people who pass through and here isn't much connection at all. And then there are other people whom you work with over a period of several semesters, or several years and you really get a chance to see their careers develop and they become friends. But both I think by choice and also just personality and inclination, I tend to keep a certain distance. By choice in the knowledge that one can get so caught up in that that there isn't any time or energy left for your own life and work, you start living through your students. And then by nature, I tend to be reticent somewhat, and shy, and tend to stay back from involvement with people unless there's some real reason for that.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Are there any students that you remember particularly well? Perhaps students whose careers have really come together. They've moved on professionally as artists. Are there any special ones that for one reason or another you remember?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Oh, I have to think about it, I guess. There are a number of people that come to mind. Jerry Gooch [?] is one.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: He was a student of yours?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, he was a student at Arts and Crafts in his fairly formative years, and somebody that I feel that I had, along with other teachers, had some part in sort of steering him, and pushing and nurturing him and so on. He blossomed very much and became for a while a very strong force in the local art scene.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you keep up with him?

ROBERT BECHTLE: In a way, yes. He's sort of dropped out of sight, or at least he's moved out of the area, has gotten involved in religious retreat, and has been working for the last couple of years, so I haven't seen him. I've heard through various sources what he's been doing, so I've kept up. There are others; there's a guy named Don Johnson who is back in New York now and apparently doing very well. He was somebody that was at Arts and

Crafts roughly the same time that Jerry was there. He's showing with Nancy Hoffman. His career is doing quite nicely. I used to see him periodically. He was living in Santa Barbara, and I would see him when I'd go down there. If I really started scratching the surface I could --

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What do you feel you have to offer your students? That's, of course, first of all a specific question, what you yourself have to offer, but then beyond that, perhaps the further implication is what does a painter have - what is the responsibility of a painter/teacher to students? That's perhaps more what you were saying philosophically.

ROBERT BECHTLE: It's very involved the question, and the answer to it is fairly involved I think because you're different things to different people, depending upon what they need at different times. But I've always felt very strongly that a teacher in the arts has a responsibility to be strongly involved in their own work, and to be a practicing artist at some kind of professional level - it doesn't have to necessarily be somebody who is successful in terms of exhibiting and selling but someone who is really working and is very serious about that. Because I think maybe the most important thing that one projects is as a kind of role model; a certain energy and a certain commitment to what you're doing, a certain sense of seriousness and a certain sense of life style. Being an artist means being a certain kind of person, certain kinds of persons, anyways, -- there are lots of different life-styles for artists. And then the rest of it, obviously this is transferred, I think, through various things that come up in the classroom, some of which are structured so you're very often talking about a lot of things that have to do with the nuts and bolts of painting, drawing, color, painting structure and so on. There's a lot of information that one can deal with, but I don't think that is important as this other aspect of it, a certain amount of the sense of just what is needed to be an artist has to somehow come through. I guess that's how I see myself functioning as a teacher.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you feel that what the teacher has to offer a student is not so much how to draw or how to paint, how to make art necessarily, but perhaps how to be an artist. It has to do with the attitude towards --

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, I think so. You teach how to, that becomes a part of it, that becomes the framework around which the whole thing operates. We talk about this quite a bit over at State because I think that the philosophy that I've enunciated is basically the way the other studio faculty feel. I think it's basically true of studio faculty in art departments all over. And we were expressing it as saying that what you teach basically is yourself. Dick McLean teaches Dick McLean and Dennis Beall teaches Dennis Beall, because they all have certain attitudes about art that are important and get communicated, and then the vehicle of communication becomes the nuts and bolts and the making of art, the how-to. Somehow we've always felt that the why of art is much more important than the how. The how is something that you can learn by yourself. A good teacher can speed things up and maybe keep somebody from making the same mistake over and over again, but the basic source that really has to do with questioning: why in the world would you really want to do this? If you do want to do it, what does it involve, what does it really involve?

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So the teaching of art, I believe, has changed a great deal over the years. I would expect that, let's say in the nineteenth century it was an academic situation, that the how was much more important than the why. The philosophical aspect was not probably as strong. I wonder - but then one thinks of famous teachers in this country - I should say in Europe as well - but one thinks of Robert Henri and people like that. Do you feel, in a way that what you articulate in terms of teaching philosophy comes out of a Henri attitude?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, I think it relates pretty much to that and grows out of that kind of attitude. But I think in the traditional Beaux Arts art school background of the nineteenth century it was probably felt that those questions were not really the domain of the art school. The art school was there to provide the technical training and the philosophical questions were for the person to deal with on their own or through other sources. I'm sure a certain amount of philosophy had to be a part of it, because you can't deal with art without getting involved in it to some extent, but I think the emphasis probably tended to be the other way. The art schools now, I think, have gone through a change in which the philosophical content became very dominant to the technical information, it was a part of that. I think we've sort of come back away from that now and we've started to move towards feeling the need for a much more traditional structure for classes, the need to reestablish that structure, not to the extent that it might have been in the old days of the academies, but more than, say, in the 1960s or early 1970s when everybody wanted to sort of throw structure out and it was like whatever you wanted to do is okay and you'd sit and talk about it and found that was not quite enough.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's exactly what I was going to ask you. I expect for many artists and artist/teachers (those who value craft and the tools of the trade - a certain discipline, let's say, in drawing) it must have been a frustrating experience to realize that that wasn't what was being emphasized. In fact in many cases, that was rejected in art school, and I suppose teachers might start questioning themselves: what am I doing here? Why was it in an academic situation, a university situation? Although I suppose one could argue on the other side that it was more philosophical it becomes the more --

ROBERT BECHTLE: I think there's probably a tendency in a university situation to let it drift towards philosophical than in art schools, where there's a certain basic realization that skill, technique and all that can't be dispensed with.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about a place like the Art Institute which – I think it's no secret that it – has been going through some very rough years and probably part of it has to do with its own self-conception of what it's supposed to do and what students expect. But what would a place like the Art Institute have to offer, it's not within a university situation where the humanities are all around so it's a broader education. It's a very specific thing, and on the other hand in recent years, as you say, a lot of the technical exercise was eliminated. What does the Art Institute offer then, what did it offer?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, that gets to be a problem. I don't know. The thing that a school like the Art Institute had to offer in the past, and what'd really their stock-in-trade is having a faculty that's made up of working artists who are committed to being working artists and who are in the forefront of what has been going on locally, anyway, and in some cases, nationally. I think they've attempted to keep doing that, but where they got into a problem perhaps recently is that the forefront of what was going on within the visual arts has tended to move towards things which are a little more ephemeral. I'm thinking of where they're dealing with performance oriented art, dealing with film, dealing with video and so on; and the people who wanted the more traditional studio arts in painting and sculpture tended then to deal with those art schools not being represented as well, I guess, in that context, because the faculty would be changing and they would have these people who would be doing these more avant-garde things, and the old line painters and sculptors were no longer there. That has become a problem, I guess, for them, and I don't know the details of it, but it's like the philosophy which has built the school over the years has run into what seems like a difficult corner to pull out of, simply because it becomes so narrow in what it offers.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well do you feel that the university situation, then, offers a better experience for a young artists than the more special art school like the Art Students League or something like that, the Art Institute, or other places?

ROBERT BECHTLE: I would have to waffle on that question. I think in some ways it does and in some ways it doesn't. The atmosphere in a university is not as intense and is in no way a substitute for what you get in a really good art school. There's just no question in my mind that for someone who wants to be a working artist, going to a school like the Art Institute or going to Arts and Crafts, any good art school, is going to give them something that no university is ever going to give them, even if it's a good art department like Davis. But conversely, the university, because of the broadness of it and the fact that there's all that stuff there that an art school simply can't and shouldn't offer – things in other fields – offers a broader kind of education for people. And so the route that one goes depends, I think, and awful lot on circumstances and what's available, whether the student can afford the tuition in an art school, whether they are really ready to participate on that intense level. I think in a lot of ways, the ideal education for an artist is to do both things, really. Like maybe do their undergraduate work at an art school and get as much technical training and stuff as they can and then do graduate work in a university. Or conversely.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about the other way around?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, sure, the other way around. I think that would work too.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Because it would seem to me that it's at the undergraduate level where the student can best benefit.

ROBERT BECHTLE: -- from the spread – that's true.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And build a basis and then, just like any graduate school, focus in on his specialty.

ROBERT BECHTLE: It's always a problem.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's interesting. But obviously you do feel that the studio course or department does have a place in a university.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Oh yes – (laughter) – certainly I do! I don't go along with the old academic tradition which has long since broken down that nothing of any practical value should be taught at the university level. Science is the place where that broke down when they started getting engineering and all the applied sciences in there, and art had sort of gone along with that, but I think studio art in the university is here to stay.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well let's shift from teaching to more specifically biographical matters, if we may. Are there any events in your own life, family life, during these years that have had any kind of important impact on your life as relevant to your work, anything like that?

ROBERT BECHTLE: It's been pretty uneventful. I think that the family, the presence of the family, children and so on, that that's been in itself important both in terms of offering a kind of subject matter, but it also has a kind of settling influence, a home base that allows work to take place without feeling frantic about what was happening in my life personally. But certainly there have been no moves or drastic changes that have occurred.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you're not of the school of thought that holds suffering as essential to great art.

ROBERT BECHTLE: I don't think so. It may be good for some individuals, but I find it counterproductive, generally.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I was going to ask you about this without focusing in on areas that may seem irrelevant, or are comments on your personal life. It seems to me from what I know about you and my contact with you that you really do have a very comfortable, secure if you'll excuse it, middle-class existence, which or course at one time the word middle class or bourgeois suggested values and so forth that seemed almost antithetical to serious art activity, or at least avant-garde. I think probably that this isn't true any more, but do you have any observations on that?

ROBERT BECHTLE: I'm not sure it ever was true. I think that's one of those myths that caught on for whatever reasons. But it seems to me that - you know, I mean I'll certainly admit to living a middle-class lifestyle. Maybe at an earlier stage, when I was a student I sort of ran away from that, and then part of growing up, I guess, was admitting to that and realizing that it was not necessarily a bad thing in that it didn't have really anything to do with the art, although I'm sure that it affects it, the kind of art. But in terms of artists' life styles that I look back towards and can sort of make a response to, that have some sort of connection with me, I look at artists like Matisse, Bonnard, or some of the Impressionists who lived very quiet middle-class lives, very comfortable lives. They were not tormented, they weren't poor, they didn't live in garrets, and so on; nor were they flamboyant. They weren't Picasso's or Edward Munch's, people who led the more publicized kind of life styles --

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: -- more dramatic personalities --

ROBERT BECHTLE: -- more dramatic personalities, really.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you see your work as reflecting a very nice and comfortable middle-class existence which you enjoy, or - well, I'll leave it at that.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, sure, I think it reflects it and in some ways, perhaps, celebrates it, but in other ways maybe there are certain ironies involved there that become present - not necessarily put in - but I think they're present, simply because it does reflect it rather accurately, and if there were any ironies in the whole problem of the middle-class life style in this country --

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You just made an interesting comment while I was changing the tape in connection with the idea of an undramatic middle-class, or stable life style.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, stable is more important, I think, than middle class. I mean, one can have a perfectly good stable life style without necessarily having to have trappings of the middle class. But the thing that I was mentioning was that a lot of people seem to forget that making art requires a great deal of time, and generally speaking it requires a space to do it in, and it requires a situation which is stable enough that allows those two things to happen. And if you're running off doing crazy things or if your life is sort of coming unraveled, you're not going to be able to make any art, your emotional stability is just too much not there. So I think the more you start getting to know artists, you start realizing that most of them live rather quietly, basically kind of middle-class life styles regardless of what the style of work is.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's an interesting observation because we have very much the idea of, say, the Abstract Expressionists as in some way tormented - this, of course doesn't apply to some - but there's a popular notion of action painting as expressing some inner conflict, subjective feelings worked out on a canvas, and one looks at that and says, "My God, what must these feelings be!" Now I realize that that's really not very accurate, but on the other hand this notion does exist in connection with - I'm just trying to think of some of the biographies - as a matter of fact there are suicides involved.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, they make more interesting biographies, that's the thing. The biography of most artists wouldn't be terribly interesting because --

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Certainly as a group, don't you feel there was more of that presence, more of a turmoil?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, it certainly seems today, yes, and of course that fit in with the popular notion of what an artist's life style should be, and it tended to get publicized.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Exactly.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, I think that those people tended also to work at a time when what they were doing didn't fit – didn't mesh with what the art hierarchy would go along with. I mean they really were kind of underground for quite a while, and the work was very unappreciated for a while, and they came in for a great deal of critical abuse. I think that tended to – I mean they obviously had to live in circumstances which financially were rather poor, because of that. There's a tradition in New York anyway of people not teaching, people do whatever they can to hold their lives together, and I think these people lived that way. And those people who were very emotionally – I won't say unstable – who tended, who went off the deep end where the problems just really got to be too much. At first the problem of no recognition and then the problems that came along with a lot of recognition, some of them couldn't deal with it. So you got people who were suicidal, and there are a number of very tragic figures.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yes, sort of disproportionate.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, really to the group, although there are people of that group who are still around and still working. Sort of the grand old men --

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: -- like Clyfford Still, I suppose?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, Still, sure, Motherwell, I suppose de Kooning – they've managed to sort of get settled in to a very comfortable life style.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Indeed. Yes, they're certainly not hurting. Of course what comes to mind then as we're talking about this, one wonders if the work depended upon the artist not being accepted readily, this alienation of rejection which we're describing. It's hard to look back and say, I suppose, there's a connection, but one wonders if this kind of painting would have been possible or would have developed anyway despite the reception which imposes certain conditions of self conception upon the artist.

ROBERT BECHTLE: It's hard to say because I think those people were probably pulled in two directions – the lack of acceptance and so on was very important because they were trying to do a kind of art that was not just what had been done. They were really trying to push for a certain kind of imagery; they were dealing with very difficult problems in it and to have them accepted just immediately would mean that somehow the problem wasn't as difficult as they thought it was. On the other hand, I think that they, like all artists, most people crave some kind of success, so in a sense they were hoping to be critically approved of at the same time they were hoping not to be approved of.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's an impossible situation. You can't have it both ways.

ROBERT BECHTLE: I think that particular group of artists, that generation, dealt with a situation in American art history, American history in general, that was quite unique. Many of the solutions that they came up with, and the resulting treatment that they came up with, and the resulting treatment that they had in the press was also fairly unique to that time. It hasn't happened since, and the way it looks, it's not going to happen again. Because they were really sort of falling into a crack there that existed between the need for American art to establish an American-ness about it and a kind of American imagery, and the examples of which had grown up in the thirties, I guess, the Grant Wood, Reginald Marsh, American scene kind of thing which they felt was not really the answer. European modernism which was really by that time a kind of played out thread – the real energy was beginning to move out of that. And so there was a kind of gap there that they fell into, they were very much coming out of the European modernist tradition, but they were also coming out of that American realist tradition in a funny way and playing against it, and in a lot of ways searching, I think, for a kind of imagery – it wasn't about places or things, but it was nevertheless image that they were dealing with, an abstract image. They're not formalist painters and they're not abstract painters in that European tradition. The paintings I think are about something very American, very image conscious. It's a very difficult thing for people to understand. To this day I can think of a lot of people who don't understand.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I'm sure that's true, despite all the books that have been written. What about your group? We were talking about a very important, influential group of painters, the Abstract Expressionists. Do you feel that you really belong to a group, and if so, how would you describe it, and who are the important people involved, colleagues?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, I belong to a group in the same sense, I guess, that artists whose work has tended to follow some more lines of development and coalesced at about the same time, would be considered a group or school or whatever. School is not the currently popular phrase, it's movement now. One sort of backs into that kind of thing. You do these things for rather precise personal reasons and then all of a sudden you discover, hey, so-and-so down in Los Angeles has been going through similar questionings and changes, and they've come up with something that's going in the same direction, and this other guy in Sacramento who's doing it, somebody

in Chicago's doing it, and so on. So I've never liked the term Photo Realist even though the term does get at the two things which are maybe very central to the whole thing, it tends to simplify things. But the artist that are of my generation that sort of started doing it about the same time I would consider the core of the group - there are probably between eight, ten or twelve artists.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Who would the important ones be for you?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, I can think of [Malcolm] Morley, for example. He's certainly one of the earliest people who started using the photograph in that way; Chuck Close, of course very important, Richard Estes, Bob Cottingham, Dick McLean, Bob G [Ralph Goings] -those are the painters. Who else? John Salk, John Clem Clarke. I guess that sort of rounds it out. These are all people that I sort of see as being central toward it. And then Duane Hanson and John De Andrea, and to some extent, Marilyn Levine.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Marilyn Levine?

ROBERT BECHTLE: The sculptress. She's a little more peripheral to it, I think. I don't think her work is quite as broadly based, maybe, just because of the small scale of it.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, what's the nature of your relationship to these other artists? Do you feel that it's a close relationship, that you really are drawn together? You became interested in one another because you, as you said, discovered that the work was going in similar directions. Do you keep in touch? Do you see one another? Do you talk about the thing that you share in common?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Sure. Whenever we see one another we ask what kind of camera we're using.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Is that true?

ROBERT BECHTLE: A lot of conversation tends to revolve around things like that I noticed which is very strange somehow the philosophical issues have been resolved and nobody wants to talk about that any more. Yes, most of these people, I see them sporadically and some of them more --

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: On trips to New York, maybe, or --

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, they come out here, when they're out here they usually - we look each other up, and sometimes correspond, although I'm not a big correspondent. Dick does that much better. But McLean, since he's out here and he's somebody I've known for a long time, we're very close friends and we've done a lot of discussing of issues during the formative period of things, so a lot of - you know, sort of trying out ideas and bouncing these out and trying to clarify what it was we thought we were doing.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you feel that McLean is your closest colleague within the group?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, sure.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What were the nature of these discussions early on when you said that you were formulating ideas?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Oh, it had to do with the use of photograph, kinds of subject matter was a big issue, the realism, the degree of realism the question of whether realism was dead end or really a viable thing for someone who professed to be a modern artist or someone who was in the modernist tradition - whether that was a feasible thing to do or whether it was --

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: There were certain critics, I believe, at one point, who raised --

ROBERT BECHTLE: Oh, certain critics are still raising the issue; they have a hard time dealing with it. You know, it was almost like is it professional suicide to do that? But on the other hand, what difference did it make? Why not just - you know, a lot of those questions were things that were talked about.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's very interesting. You asked, then, some very pragmatic, some very practical questions in professional terms.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Oh yes, sure. There were also aesthetic questions that came up, because they're part of it, too. They had to do with those three issues, really. The degree of realism, you know, does it stay loose, painterly, and keep its connection to abstraction, traditional abstraction in that sense. Does one use the photographs in a way that grows out of Pop Art in which they're sort of montaged so that the basic structure of the painting is abstract - is that a way, then, of keeping the connection with the modernist painting?

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: -- serious modernism --

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, right. And of course, the subject matter. What kind of things should one paint? How can you deal with something in a – as those issues, you know, the issues of the structure tend to get settled more and more in the direction of saying, well, all those other, you know, the connection to modernism is not really going to be resolved by just as simply and dumb a thing as whether you collage or montage things, or whether you do it as a single unified image. But then as the unified image started to become – obviously what should happen – then it was like, what should it be of? What kind of subject matter should one deal with? That's something that we would talk about a great deal.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: At what point so you felt that you and other members of this group or movement recognized yourselves as participating in something unique, or something that could be described?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, it began to sort of shape up, I guess, around about 1968, 1967 or 1968. There were several exhibitions that were sort of pioneering in that sense. There was one that Linda Nochlin put together at Vassar. I think that was in 1966, which was of modern American realist painting. It wasn't Photo Realism oriented particularly; it had some of those people plus some of the studio realists.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Like Pearlstein?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, Pearlstein and Jack Beal. And there was a show that was at the Milwaukee Art Center, I think, that was in 1967 or 1968, and that was really like a first national kind of showing that traveled around a couple of places and I think that catalogue of that show helped to sort of coalesce. It was then that everybody in the show started realizing that here were these other people who are functioning in other little corners of the same – or at least similar kinds of ideas. And so right about that time I think then the Whitney did their show called, Twenty-two Realists in 1969 – it was put together in 1969 – I guess it was 1970 when that show was up. And that was really the first time that a lot of people started getting together. I think I'd met some of the West Coast people – I knew [Ralph] Goings by that time, and I knew Cottingham and some of the other LA artists there but that was about it. Then McLean and I went back to the opening of the Whitney show and that was when we met Clarke, Estes, and Close. I began to realize that there was some kind of connection between all these artists' works.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What do you feel has contributed to the success of Photo Realism as a movement? Obviously, some artists are more successful than others, but basically, I think one would have to say that the movement is pretty well recognized as something authentic and important and is enjoying, certainly within the last few years, quite success. To what would you attribute that?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, I think it's basically attributed to the fact that the artists who were involved in it were dealing with things that hadn't been dealt with in quite the same way, and that they were all artists who were, you know, serious, committed artists with ability; they had something to say that hadn't really been said in quite that way. And the other things that go along with the media hype, the galleries pushing it, and so on, all really sort of come after the fact. The media can't hype something that doesn't exist.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's true.

ROBERT BECHTLE: You know, people sort of saw it as being something that came along after Pop Art and therefore a logical and appropriate step --

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: -- it's appropriate art historically --

ROBERT BECHTLE: -- historically, yeah, right. And in a lot of way that's true, it was. And this was sort of pushed by the dealers. But I think a lot of people resented that, too. The critics sort of said, well, here's one more thing that the dealers are pushing and trying to hype; that, plus the fact that it was realistic which they didn't like, and the fact that it was copied from photographs which was just kind of beyond the pale – got people upset. And as to how important it is, that remains to be seen, but it's a bona fide event in American art that's happened.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Do you feel though – I want to be careful how I phrase this, I don't want to make you mad at me – do you feel it's possible that part of the momentum picked up by the movement, by the group, has to do with the accessibility of the image? What I mean by this, working in a realist manner which is more generally accessible and understandable on one level, and also at the same time perhaps certain people were becoming tired of a spate of movements, especially those that were more difficult – Op – not Pop so much because you could recognize the objects at least, but then Post-painterly Abstraction and the whole Formalist movement which many describe as “the emperor with no clothes.” I wouldn't describe it that way, but do you see what I'm getting at? I don't want to say that Photo Realism is less serious than something else, but it does seem on one level to be more accessible. That's a long way to ask a question.

ROBERT BECHTLE: It is more readily accessible, I think, to an unsophisticated audience. It did attract a following as a result of that. There were young collectors who got very turned on by – you know, they say, here's a

movement I can understand, and they became embarrassingly chauvinistic about their enthusiasm for Photo Realism and certain dealers even to this day still are that way. But I think that there was also a core of dealers, some critics, and collectors who had tastes that were much broader and who had bought works of previous styles, and say it as a bona fide extension of American painting and participated in it with enthusiasm for that reason. These were the people who one sort of felt were the ones we wanted to – we hoped that they were right. But then the other side of it was that I think the seeming accessibility of the work because of the style tended to put off a lot of people who were much more committed to the more obscure avant-garde styles, and so the two things tended to be almost at the standoff, sort of antagonistic, you know. You had these people who were very enthusiastic but they weren't helping you very much because they were the wrong people in fact. They were enthusiastic not because the work was any good, but because they could tell what it was. And then you had the critics who were very much opposed to the work, again not because it was any good or not, but because they could tell what was happening.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's a no win situation! What role had exhibitions played in the development of your career? It seems interesting to me that I believe you didn't have your first one man show until 1965 which seems maybe a little bit late, and that was at the Berkeley Gallery in San Francisco. Is that right?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, yes and no. There were several smaller unimportant shows like student-type shows, where I had some works down in a little gallery in Carmel and there was a gallery in Berkeley and that sort of thing which I've not really --

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: --record --

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, they were there but they were not that crucial. Then I think the earliest show in a place of any significance was one of those print shows that they do in the corridors of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and that was in 1959. Okay, the Berkeley Gallery was really the first showing of the works that were starting to go in the realist direction, and at that time the gallery was in Berkeley.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Oh, really was it? Okay.

ROBERT BECHTLE: -- before they moved to San Francisco. Actually it was a fairly large space and so we set up a format of having two one-man shows on simultaneously. We each had half of the gallery and the show I had at that time was with Dick McLean. He was a member of the gallery too.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So it was not a one-man show, actually.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, in effect it was a two-man show. We thought of it as being two one-man shows.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Either that or two half-man shows. Well, you were with the Berkeley Gallery for a while and I'm not clear on the history of that gallery and we don't necessarily have to go into that, but you were associated with Winterstein for awhile?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, for quite a while. From I guess 1964 when I came into it. I'm not sure when I dropped out of it, but it was maybe like the early 1970s or 1972.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Almost a decade, then.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, almost a decade.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And so she represented you, or did you have a dealer in New York?

ROBERT BECHTLE: No, actually, when I started showing in New York the Berkeley Gallery connection started being less able to work, because I was funneling all the work through New York and there really wasn't any work to deal with in San Francisco at that point, so I dropped out of the gallery then.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you feel that you were just simply not getting the proper exposure there at the Berkeley Gallery?

ROBERT BECHTLE: Well, not really. The Berkeley was an interesting gallery in that it was an artists' cooperative. There was a very limited group of people where the artists chose who was going to be in it. There were usually about twenty people who were involved, and it had a really good group all the way along. As people dropped out, other people of equal stature or even better would come in – very high stature. And the local art world was a part of it, so it was always a good place to show and we always got good local exposure. The shows were always reviewed and all that. It got to be a combination of my work taking longer to do, so there was less of it available. The pressure was to send the work to New York where there was a market for it, rather than to just simply show it in San Francisco where they would hang it on the wall but that was the extent of it. And then after being in the gallery for a while, I'd had a couple of shows there, and so that had gotten to be old stuff. In other words, it



wasn't enough just to have some walls to hang some paintings on, you know, what was really necessary at that point was to have a dealer rather than just an art gallery. And the Berkeley Gallery for all sorts of reasons simply couldn't function as a dealer. Marion [Winterstein] tried to, but the cooperative nature of the gallery, the sort of part-time staffing of it, and just not having the killer instinct that a bigger dealer has to have that's probably not the right way to phrase it, but the business acumen to be able to go out and really chase down the collectors, where to go, who to see, who to wine and dine and how to – the person I am working with in New York, [Ivan Karp] is one of the best.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Art you still with Karp?

ROBERT BECHTLE: And so the role of the gallery in my career got changed.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's interesting. That's very interesting. In describing the situation with showing your work and selling it, do you make it clear that you really have to connect with – directly with the New York representative to extend that a little bit? Do you feel that as an artist working in – chosen to work in California, in the Bay Area that you've given up anything that's important in connection with your career?

ROBERT BECHTLE: You mean in staying here?

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yes.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, I think so. I think in some ways its been aided by being able to have connections – leads, you know you have to have a dealer there. It has been a strong dealer, so the work has been exposed in the East a lot. In a lot of cases, people have no idea where I live. My work is sort of there. It's connected with that gallery.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So it's okay, you might be a New York artist.

ROBERT BECHTLE: Yes, I might be a New York artist. Other people though, sort of assumed that I lived in New York or somewhere in the East. So that part of it hasn't been that crucial. It hasn't been that much of a disadvantage, but I think where it is a disadvantage is not being right on the scene, being there, and knowing what is going on. Being able to sense things very quickly in relationships with people, dealers, so on.

[Tape ends abruptly. End of Bechtle interview]

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... June 28, 2005