Oral history interview with Margaret Tomkins, 1984 June 6

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Margaret Tomkins on June 6, 1984. The interview took place in Seattle, WA, and was conducted by Bruce Guenther for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

[Tape 1; side A]

BRUCE GUENTHER: Just try speaking the way you normally speak.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Okay, I'll be thinking this way and probably recapitulating a few things, trying to figure out a good memory system, because I really deal [professionally] in the past. Very few people ask me [backward] questions.

BRUCE GUENTHER: I know, it's something else to go to the back and then come forward.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes, it's sort of a devious route-- 300 steps back and one step forward.

BRUCE GUENTHER: (laughs) That's right. Sounds like the museum world.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Well, if that's the way to go, I mean...

[Break in taping]

BRUCE GUENTHER: Margaret, you were born September 11, 1916, in Los Angeles?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yeah, uh huh, yes.

BRUCE GUENTHER: What was your family? Were you an only child? Your parents and their names?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Well, I spent 20 years in L.A., about, and was born there. My father was from Australia, and he spent any extra time he got in painting and his [business]... My mother, well, she really dedicated, up until she was about 32, her life to music-- piano-- and then with marriage, as is often inevitable, things seemed to deteriorate and she didn't play as much. And so it was a very supportive environment. I have a brother, who is two years older, and each of us went to universities in L.A. at the time. My grandfather had come out to California-- the family is from Ireland, opposite sides of it-- and came out to California in the seventies [1870--Bruce Guenther], and my mother was born in Sacramento.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Oh, in Sacramento.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yeah. We've been around there... My grandfather had an interesting background too. Of course, because he was pretty good with his hands, and in the land-boom in California after the gold rush and so forth, there were many signs were needed for the sale and the description of property, so he would make signs. But in addition, he also painted landscape scenes to attract Easterners to come west, on the sides of the Pullman trains. And they were made out of wood, so it was a pretty good background for painting scenes. So he got into manufacturing of paint, and theirs was the first paint manufacturing company in Los Angeles. That'd be turn of the century, 1906 maybe, something like that.

BRUCE GUENTHER: What was his name?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Quinn, John Quinn. Good Irish name.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Very much. And then your father was Australian and he'd come to California?

MARGARET TOMKINS: He had come over in the 1900s, right, from Australia, by way of Vancouver [British Columbia--Bruce Guenther], and down to California area. And so he was also involved in the paint manufacturing business. People often say did that encourage you to paint? Well, the paint was kind of house paint. Two-thirds oil and one percent color (chuckles) and sort of slide down the canvas, you know.

BRUCE GUENTHER: (laughs) Yes.

MARGARET TOMKINS: And lots of linseed.
BRUCE GUENTHER: His name was...?
MARGARET TOMKINS: Well, that would-- Do you want the whole thing?
BRUCE GUENTHER: Yeah!
MARGARET TOMKINS: Percival James Tomkins. That's what his name was.
BRUCE GUENTHER: And your mother's name was...?
MARGARET TOMKINS: Was Margaret Quinn.
BRUCE GUENTHER: Ah, so you're named after your mother?
MARGARET TOMKINS: Uh huh. And my brother's name was Jack Tomkins. So that's the whole group, and as I say we were educated there, and...
BRUCE GUENTHER: Well, that's right; you went to the University of Southern California.
MARGARET TOMKINS: Yeah, eventually. I didn't really get too much into any formal education in art, because in high school I was in boarding school for three years. I had had polio as soon I got out of grade school, so I was sort of crippled up for a while. And the quiet life of boarding school was supposed to be restorative. (chuckles) I'm not too sure I agree.
BRUCE GUENTHER: Did you go to boarding school in California or...?
MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes, right. And so then I took some lessons during the summer periods at art schools in Los Angeles. By then I was into college where I formally worked at it. And aside from the college focus on art, I would usually in the summer-- well, near the end I had my own studio-- but I also went to Chouinard Art School during the summer.
BRUCE GUENTHER: Who was teaching at the school [University of Southern California--Ed.] when you were there? Do you remember any of those teachers?
MARGARET TOMKINS: Oh, well, for the records, you know, since this crosses over, the Archives would know Dan Lutz, who's from L.A.
BRUCE GUENTHER: Um hmm.
MARGARET TOMKINS: And then there was an excellent teacher brought in for a short while, Don Prendergast (just like the painter, Prendergast). He is from Chicago. And he was an interesting person. Those were the two main art teachers. And they weren't the types that laid their scene on you; they showed you ways and attitudes that were expansive. So it was very productive that way. I started exhibiting by the time I was a junior and senior, so forth. And then in my graduate year, I was an assistant instructor there. I was also kind of heavily involved with one media, with the watercolor, which I enjoyed a lot. Otherwise I worked in oil.
BRUCE GUENTHER: Oh, so you were working in oil at that time?
MARGARET TOMKINS: Oh yes.
BRUCE GUENTHER: And then you were involved with the California Watercolor Society?
MARGARET TOMKINS: Right, I was a secretary, an officer.
BRUCE GUENTHER: Oh! Do you remember which years?
MARGARET TOMKINS: Yeah, it'd be 1939. Because I was still doing it when I first came up here, '39 and'40.
BRUCE GUENTHER: Okay. And so you came to the Northwest because of a teaching job?
MARGARET TOMKINS: That's right. Yes. What I wanted to do was get out of the L.A. scene. I'd been there quite a while.
BRUCE GUENTHER: Yeah.
MARGARET TOMKINS: It had been pretty exciting, though. The things you'd see, like for instance Picasso's Guernica. I knew Earl Stendahl, and an artist friend of mine worked at the place. And here was this fantastic Guernica that just fitted exactly the wall; it might have had an eighth an inch on each side. The Stendahl Gallery
had bought in, and that was to raise funds for the Spanish Civil War. It wasn't too successful project, but that was the idea, so it was very exciting. And all his drawings for it.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Oh, so you got to see all those studies?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes, right. It was really a choice show. And then they have some excellent collections, but I saw more of those about two years later.

BRUCE GUENTHER: So in the L.A. scene at that time, Stendahl's Gallery was very important, because of the kind of things he was doing.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes, right.

BRUCE GUENTHER: The Municipal Museum wasn't, was it?

MARGARET TOMKINS: No, that was not really exciting at all. It was a cross between looking at the fossils out of LaBrea tar pits and going to the art museum. Except for the oil, you couldn't tell the difference. (laughter) And tar.

BRUCE GUENTHER: That's great. Well, were either of the Mexican muralists in L.A.? Did you have any contact with them?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Not really; they weren't around there. I think Rivera did something up in San Francisco [Art Institute mural--Bruce Guenther]. But I don't believe any public commission was typical of L.A. with the Mexicans.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Yeah, right. Rico LeBrun wasn't there yet.

MARGARET TOMKINS: That's up in San Francisco. No! No, you're right. Rico LeBrun was around there. But I didn't find him very interesting.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Your work from early on was fairly abstract, wasn't it?

MARGARET TOMKINS: No. I started "real good" realism. And I still use that as a means-- To abstract something, I think you have to understand the basic of what it is. And eventually you use sort of a symbol language of your own, as you mature. So that you don't do as much close study. But through the years I've always worked fairly closely in doing personal studies of things that present a problem; it's no use solving it in the painting. It becomes fairly apparent it hasn't been resolved, you know.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Yeah.

MARGARET TOMKINS: So, that phase of the thing was not so typical of the later period, but it was at that time. And I had really worked more, I would say, expressionist, the more, [rather] [in pastel; impasto] and ____. But it's supposed to be typical, you know. The teachers were kind of that way. And it was a period where tightness, dryness, in painting wasn't so common. Of course, the art project [WPA--Ed.] was going on then, and through lots of contacts, I knew more artists that perhaps didn't even go to college, but they were in their thirties, that type of thing, that older manner, and much more experienced. And some of those were on the project.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Yeah.

MARGARET TOMKINS: But I was never on the project. There was something written somewhere recently on that.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Yeah, the WPA project is being studied again.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yeah, I was never on it, in any way.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Oh really? So even when you came up here, you were still...?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yeah.

BRUCE GUENTHER: So you came up here to be, what, an assistant professor of art?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes.

BRUCE GUENTHER: For a semester or a year?

MARGARET TOMKINS: For a year, right. And I had written to different places and I'd gotten an offer at Reed and one out in Kansas City, or someplace out there. I was willing to go anyplace.
BRUCE GUENTHER: (chuckles) The purpose was to exit L.A.?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes, right, to get a good change. The area in the Northwest sounded interesting, so I moved up there. And for one year, then, I taught here and got a studio and taught everything, it seemed like. It seemed it was a fairly full schedule, like a flea all week.

BRUCE GUENTHER: (laughs) Well, Walter Isaacs was not one to let his faculty sit around doing nothing, I've heard.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes, he had a really full schedule. And some interesting people had come in from Europe. They were kind of before my time. I think Ozenfant was here and Archipenko?

BRUCE GUENTHER: Um hmm.

MARGARET TOMKINS: I didn't know them. There was a curious man from Germany who came then and was quite interesting, but has become relatively unknown, which is not too hard to have happened. And his name was [Johannes--Ed.] Molzahn. And he was just there a year [or two], because his ideas were too radical, and also no one knew what he was saying.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Ah. Did he come out of a Bauhaus tradition, or more the German expressionist?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes, and it was constructivist too, which was fascinating. With materials on the surface and gold, gold papers and silvers, and the like. He was quite an interesting person.

BRUCE GUENTHER: During the '38 to '40 [period--Ed.], you were exhibiting all over the place: Brooklyn, L.A., San Francisco, New York World's Fair. Those were group shows in which your work was included?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Um hmm, right, yes. I hadn't had-- Well, of course the university always had a one-person [faculty--Ed.] show. But at that time I hadn't had a thing, any individual show, half of it.

BRUCE GUENTHER: In 1940, you met James FitzGerald.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Here in Seattle?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes, yes. Right. I had come up to teach then, and as I say I taught art history. All they wanted was to know from prehistoric man to yesterday, taught at eight o'clock in the morning five days a week. (laughter) Oh, the snores were inundating. You had to really talk very loudly, because most of the people were asleep. And really a speed course to do that in three months, but I tried it. (laughter) Kaleidoscopic.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Well, it must have been very different coming from Los Angeles and the art scene there to Seattle in the late thirties, early forties. There wasn't a very large scene here, was there? The museum was built and open.

MARGARET TOMKINS: I couldn't find any scene. It seemed very inactive. There were very reactionary groups that had certain things that were-- by that, I mean they weren't reacting; they had no action. And so they would be like the Puget Sound Painters and some print society and that kind of stuff. So there didn't seem to be anything that was responsive to being included in shows, [or] which would be quite contrary.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Yeah.

MARGARET TOMKINS: And so when I came up here, then, I got a studio, down at the end of the University Bridge, you know, in that building that sort of looks like a chateau with boards on it?

BRUCE GUENTHER: Right. There at Eastlake and...

MARGARET TOMKINS: And Boren, right.

BRUCE GUENTHER: And [under] the bridge.

MARGARET TOMKINS: And I had the bottom octagonal room with about six windows in it. So it was utterly confusing to paint. You could get six types of light. And Jim, my husband, James FitzGerald, had a studio on top, on the third floor, so it was natural one would meet. And we did, and then the next year, after I was through teaching in '40, we got married that September, down in California.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Oh, so you went to California, back to the family in L.A.
MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes, right.

BRUCE GUENTHER: And then at some point you ended up going to Spokane, what '41?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Oh let's see how that worked. We got this place that you're in now, in 1939. I think it was $1200, and that included the lot and the building. And it was kind of an old homestead house with lots of trees around it. The summer before we got married was spent on making it structurally sound; it was wooden throughout. It would, of course, need plumbing. And so then we came back, and Jim got a job at the university [of Washington--Ed.] teaching; and that was just a [quarter] [of the house? or at the university?--Ed.] over there. And then, Carl Morris, the former director at the Spokane [Art--Ed.] Center, for some reason, was coming back on the west side of the mountains, and was leaving the job, and so Bruce Inverarity, who was head of the project, appointed Jim as director. It was a federal project, not really WPA or that kind of a thing. You didn't have to be certified that you were poverty-stricken, or anything, even though we were. And at that time then we moved over there, which was a delightful experience. And it had a big farmhouse, and I taught some classes too-- gratuitously; I had no salary attached to mine. And it was a wonderful center.

I had a show over there a while ago. Spokane has really some possibilities on unknown levels, because the people are not sophisticated, but their minds are never all closed. And we found that at the time. People'd come in from the hinterlands and under some type of instruction and training, not only would they become skilled, but they'd have means of expressing themselves, and be sensitized to art.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Hmm. At the time, was Guy Anderson there?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Guy was there, yes. He went over the same time we went. And he stayed at our place for a while in Spokane. We were all good friends over there.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Well, Clyfford Still was at W.S.U. [Washington State University--Ed.] about that time, down in Pullman. I don't know if he was ever connected with the Spokane Art Center or not.

MARGARET TOMKINS: No, he wasn't. I met him once over-- I can't remember the fellow's name; he was an Eastern artist-- and Carolyn Kizer, the poet, was there and Clyff Still. And I'd seen his work around, because it was well, sort of like Mark Tobey did: he was making enough money to survive over there by doing rather awful portraits of wealthy ladies. (chuckles)

BRUCE GUENTHER: (laughs) Really?

MARGARET TOMKINS: That would have it in wheat [have made their wealth in wheat--Ed.]. They [the paintings--Ed.] were just hard to take, you know. It's unbelievable. They must be all gone. I hope. I think they're locked in there, [still, Still].

BRUCE GUENTHER: It's funny, you'll never read about those portraits in the stories Clyfford Still tells.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Oh, no way! I bet they're still around there. Gervais's mother was there; she may be dead now. But she would know where all those Stills are. It would be interesting to check them out some time.

BRUCE GUENTHER: It would be. That's Gervais Reed's mother. That's interesting.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes. I forget her name, because she was very active with the art museum there, art club or whatever, in Spokane. So we brought in exhibitions and the most dramatic one was, we had eleven vanGoghs. There had never been a vanGogh show in the Northwest. This was circulated by the Museum of Modern Art. And it was in this gallery and we had a fellow that was just sort of retired alcoholic, for night supervisor. He'd sit there and sleep and hit the bottle, while these precious vanGogh's... At that time he wasn't that significant. That'd be 1940. And they thought nothing of just loaning them. Beautiful. Great paintings.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Oh, that's nice. At the same time, you had a one-person show with the Seattle Art Museum in '41?

MARGARET TOMKINS: If it says so, why I did. In '41? Is that when the show was down at the Palace [of Fine Arts--Ed.] in San Francisco?

BRUCE GUENTHER: Yes, I think so.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Well, that is sort of a reversed process there, to send... San Francisco? Yes. Right. That was a small show at that time. So it was really my first museum show.

BRUCE GUENTHER: So you were in Spokane, what, a year or two?
MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes, about a year. That would be '41 and through the next Christmas and then the war started. And so that yanked Jim FitzGerald out of there, and he went to Boeing's. He was born in Seattle, 1910. And his training had been in architecture; he graduated in architecture as far as the formal school education. At the same time, he had been very active in painting, and during the summer, sort of after he graduated then, he worked in Mexico, as the helper of, I think it was the Orozco frescoes, and then worked with Henry Varnum Poor on his murals [in Colorado Springs--Ed.]. And then he went to Kansas City, where he was instructor there in painting, and worked under Benton as...

BRUCE GUENTHER: Thomas Hart Benton. Oh!

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes, right. For about two years. So when I met him in 1940, that would be the background that he had-- somewhat condensed here. And his paintings there were typical of the Benton influence; it was like Pollock's were at that time. Benton had very a strong influence on people. I think you own one from that early period?

BRUCE GUENTHER: Yeah, the museum does [The Potato Eaters, 1937--Ed.].

MARGARET TOMKINS: You can see the close affinity, the Benton influence at that time, which of course changed then.

BRUCE GUENTHER: So then, '42, you come back to Seattle because of the war.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Right. [FitzGerald] spent three years there at Boeing's, as head of the production illustration department, which makes isometric drawings, dimensional drawings, so that the war workers would understand how to do their work. They couldn't read the straight blueprints, which were in dimension.

BRUCE GUENTHER: So you'd use classical perspective and show them what it's supposed to look like.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes, really, in dimension. And so after that-- that would take in the war years-- well, we had moved, as I mentioned before, to this old farmhouse and really had fixed it up pretty well. Then, after we came back, my first son was born. And the job at Boeing's continued. And the day the war ended, that was the end; he quit the job immediately. So most of our time there, particularly FitzGerald's-- mine was probably more spent with the younger child for a while-- but there was a regular pattern with painting three or four hours a day, and that'd be usually in the evenings. They came more in the forms of sketches and works and studies, small, and then as you got more time, you would make the larger ones, you know.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Right.

MARGARET TOMKINS: And I had, in the college period, worked on my thesis, as it were-- it was on mural painting and compared fresco and tempera painting-- so I had tempera fresco. And so I'd gotten into that a little, but Jim was heavily into it from Benton. Of course, that's how Benton worked-- in tempera and glazing and oils. A lot of my interest in tempera originated with that new media which rather attracted me, because it had certain qualities of course of watercolor. And the flatness seemed very interesting to me.

BRUCE GUENTHER: So then Jared would have been born in, what, '44.

MARGARET TOMKINS: '44. And that would have been just before the war ended. We were still living in this place here.

BRUCE GUENTHER: That's interesting that you'd won another purchase prize in the Northwest Annual, and the Seattle Art Museum bought Metamorphosis... I'm interested in what you thought about the Seattle scene at that point. The war really had pushed a lot of people out, people like the Japanese artists, [who-Ed.] had been put into the camps.

MARGARET TOMKINS: You wouldn't know about it, because it didn't seem like you knew of many Japanese artists. You know, like Tsutakawa and the rest were not as well known at that time... We rented our house to George Nakashima, who [now--Ed.] works in the east; he designs the fabulous wood furniture. Jim knew him at Boeing's. And he moved into our house here when we went to Spokane. They pulled him out, of course; when the war started then pushed him east of the mountains. And the artists themselves, most of them were conscientious objectors. I think Wendell Lovett or something, at the university, was under Jim at Boeing's; about the only outlet for an artist, would be under Jim's department there, so there were a few that would surface. But I think most of them were either decrepit or something, or they were conscientious objectors perhaps. I think Morris Graves was.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Yes, he was.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Actually like every part of the country, I think it did a lot of damage for the progression of...
BRUCE GUENTHER: Well, you've mentioned Benton, and I'm sure that it felt very regional here. You felt more regional here than in L.A. I'm sort of fishing about your attitude, about your own work. In the news clippings they always talk about how abstract and modern your work was compared to much that was being seen in the Seattle area at that period.

MARGARET TOMKINS: That's true. I think it's even typical now. It's sort of like a tide coming in; the water finally reaches here, but it's diminishing its power when it hits the West Coast often. Particularly if it's originated in New York. And so [if] it was typical there, then regionalism in painting finally moved from the Midwest and so forth, which was typical for the Depression period. And there weren't as many working abstractly. But in the later part, after the war, when you got some of those top artists in from Europe that were in exile, it was a much more spirited scene nationally. As far as Seattle-- you can see: Graves has a show, and if you check the dates, he and a couple of Guy Andersons' [paintings-Ed.] were the most sensitive and personal statement in a more subtle way; and with national handling, as you see in that show, those washes and depths and the sensitivity would describe rather than power, in other words. While the European artists coming in, I loved the color.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Uh hmm.

MARGARET TOMKINS: And I think that would be the kind of catalyst that was transferred to American artists that picked up on those energies-- the Pollocks and so forth, that when the war ended were switched from the locked-in scene in America to recognizing that it was a big world, you know.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Yeah. In your own work of that period, I think of it as being kind of a very personalized surrealist kind of imagery, an imagery that comes out of the abstracting, certainly, from nature, but it seems definitely to share a sympathy with surrealist work of the period. Is that accurate at all?

MARGARET TOMKINS: I think it's fairly accurate, because what you're thinking of is-- or I was thinking of-- is the metamorphosis, like the painting's even titled [Metamorphosis--Ed.], is common to the thing, the changing possibility, mentally and physically, of objects you look at, depending upon how you view them, how your mind is, and how your thoughts are. And it was in that transfer of energies from, say, a material object into a more intuitive object. And the energies that would be inherent in the realistic form, having been developed through abstracting it and metamorphizing it into new shapes, created, re-created the energy of the original thing in a whole new guise. And that was something that I probably was into, maybe '45 and into '48 or '9, I would think.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Your second child was born in '46; that was Miro. It seems like all the children have artists' or art-related names. Were these homages?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Well, Jared is biblical. Really the premise is based on a name that couldn't be nicknamed.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Ah! Really?

MARGARET TOMKINS: That was just based on two vowels. And there's no way to go, unless you just initialize them. So even with the last one, it was named after-- I liked the name of Dali's wife Gala, G-A-L-A, and Miro, then the second was [from] Jared. So that's how these names kind of worked out. (chuckles)

BRUCE GUENTHER: I see.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Miro is kind of after a painter. We were speaking there about-- or I was-- about the influence of Europeans coming in, and I'd mentioned earlier, '39, there was that Guernica I saw down in L.A. And then before we were married, we went down to pick up a fantastic Picasso show, in '40, at San Francisco; it was a full show of his, filled the whole San Francisco museum. And artists from all over just came into that. You'd see people from everyplace. And that was a real excitement in that.

And another time-- oh, it'd be during-- not the war years, I don't think, because you wouldn't have gasoline-- but in L.A. they had some fantastic collections that were certainly influential in guiding one to the maximum standard for your own work, and that would be the Galka Scheyer collection of the Klees.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Oh, the Blue Four.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Well, yes, and the...

BRUCE GUENTHER: The Jawlensky.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes, but she had a couple hundred Klees, too. And then the EdwardG. Robinson collection with Corots. His was more of an excellent quality type group. And then the Arensberg collection, of course, with the Duchamps and the Brancusis. And the excitement of just visiting that several times, in its own environment,
because all of these were in the people's homes.

BRUCE GUENTHER: And were accessible to you through your connections.

MARGARET TOMKINS: That's right. They were happy to show them to artists. I don't know how they felt about other people, but you could just phone them up, or write a little note if you wanted to. But they were happy to spread the word. And after we were down there, what was curious, sometime within the forties, maybe early fifties, a consortium of people [were going to give each of these people-- and the Maitland collection was another-- fantastic; I'm speaking of maybe eighty, sixty paintings, seventy, top quality-- give them all to the L.A. museum. And they [the museum--Ed.] didn't want them. And then they thought maybe UCLA. Finally, they all broke up. Robinson got a divorce and that split that up; then Arensberg gave his to the Philadelphia museum.

BRUCE GUENTHER: That would be a fabulous resource and would certainly link in with your ideas. Your work has always been connected into a larger dialog than many people think of as a uniquely Northwest dialog.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes, I think sometimes that people around here are afflicted for just kind of pulling the lichens over them and thinking this was the wilderness area, you know. That was interesting; it gives you a good sense of isolation, which I use myself. If you were isolated; that's a plus. But in terms of recognizing at all times the potential and the solutions in art that are already been arrived at, then it seems ridiculous: not too usable, to continually start at a beginning as if you were discovering something.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Well, during the forties, you used egg tempera. And that was reinforced with what FitzGerald was doing. I ran across something-- You were doing ceramics for a while?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Did you have a wheel and...?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Oh yes. At University of Southern California, I had taken a year or so with Glen Lukens, the ceramist down there. He was quite known down there, I think. And some of his students are quite well known; I know some are in the archives down there in San Francisco. So, yes, that was pretty good with Glen, and it was an interesting deviation. I hadn't worked in sculpture particularly.

And so our energies had to be maintained by some economic base. During the war years, it was a basic income. And you were so used to living on the minimal. You'd probably make a couple of hundred dollars a month, then, at Boeing's, $250 maybe; that'd be a lot of money. After it was over then, there was no source of income, period. And you couldn't count on [sales]-- the galleries here in town were nonexistent. And there wasn't even a buying public.

Because, you know how Tobey was having to teach painting on the Avenue [University Way--Ed.] and all of that kind thing. And teaching painting, this house was confusing, this studio was confusing enough without bringing in people to teach; you know, there wasn't room enough. (chuckles) And although we had added one studio room on during the war-- that room in there. So the...

BRUCE GUENTHER: The ceramics then were kind of an income?

MARGARET TOMKINS: It was an income, yes. We would put on a survival splurge and work for a couple of months within a media that had some audience for it. And so we worked using the ceramics, probably two or three years, and enamels, glass. There isn't anything through firing temperatures that we haven't done, in other words, kiln handling. So it wasn't much [of a--Ed.] step, in certain degrees, to bronze, which later my husband worked in. But again, you would then put on this exhibition for maybe an intense period of about a week or ten days, usually around the Christmas season, and that would get you through. And then we did quite a lot of, over the years, commission work for architectural firms.

BRUCE GUENTHER: So, along with this, two small children, you were also throwing pots and making enamel panels and making sketches and studies for bigger paintings...

MARGARET TOMKINS: Right.

BRUCE GUENTHER: ...and working with tempera. Plus adding onto the house, and Jim was working at Boeing, and also doing all this.

MARGARET TOMKINS: He was out of there by then. See, during Boeing's, there was enough funds to keep no problem. It was after the immediate thing [funds--Ed.] when he had stopped Boeing's, of course, we were into that. So there's a lot of work of Jim's around in all kinds of places.

BRUCE GUENTHER: During the forties, you were in a couple of major shows: the Abstract and Surrealist American
Art exhibit at the Chicago Art Institute. You had a piece purchased from that show, I think.

MARGARET TOMKINS: That's right.

BRUCE GUENTHER: In '47?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Right. It was purchased out of Chicago there. And it was recently shown at Surrealist and Abstract show, that was held in the east. Because nothing was happening here. In the Northwest Annual-- which is missed today, even, because in retrospect, I think some people here maybe don't have that usual one painting even shown a year. The Northwest Annual did winnow out through a jury system, but you usually were in the show if you wanted to send.

BRUCE GUENTHER: So that you think the Northwest Annual in the forties certainly was important.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Well, with no galleries, it was absolutely essential. In just getting a chance to get your painting out of the studio, not that you have to do it after that; you went to the museum and then came back. But you did see what was happening in the region, you know-- and that was usable. So in general, then, the exhibiting I was doing-- and FitzGerald was too-- was in different shows in the East, and that would be New York and the Whitney show that I was in for four or five years, and the Corcoran and a number of Eastern shows.

BRUCE GUENTHER: You were basically looking beyond Seattle because there was nothing significant happening here for you, and your audience was a national audience?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Well, it seemed to be that way. Also there was a very close relationship, that went on to about the fifties here eventually, of just a group of artists that the museum was responsive to. And so when museum people would come out from the East-- very infrequently, we were sort of in the hinterlands; they’d hit San Francisco maybe; they wouldn't come through here to pick a show very often. Katharine Kuh was an exception, and Dorothy Miller from the Museum of Modern Art came out, you know, which started Morris Graves' career in that [Americans 1942: Artists from 9 States exhibition, 1942-Ed.]. While others in that same show just sort of just disappeared. And in that case, and in many other cases, it was just siphoned through the museum and you only heard about it after the fact. So it was simpler to send to shows where eastern museum people'd get familiar with the work and then would invite you to the show in the east.

BRUCE GUENTHER: In '47 you had a one-person show, 23 paintings at the Seattle Art Museum, and then it went to San Francisco to the Palace of the Legion of Honor.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Well, really that's backwards; it was an invitation from the Palace of Legion of Honor. They initiated the show.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Ohhh!

MARGARET TOMKINS: [Douglas--Ed.] MacAgy was there then. And Charles Howard, who was quite a painter of the period that was discussed in this other book here on the surrealist show [Jeffrey Wechsler, Surrealism and American Art 1931-1947 (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Art Gallery, 1977--Ed.], was very supportive of my painting. And not having any communication with anybody, it was rather nice to hear that he was responding to the paintings. And so then it was brought up and then shown here.

BRUCE GUENTHER: After the show in California?

MARGARET TOMKINS: After the show-- Right.

BRUCE GUENTHER: How long did you maintain your active connections with the California scene? With the Watercolor Society and...

MARGARET TOMKINS: Oh, I think the societies went just soon after I got up here. It was all gone, yes. I think I sent to one show down there and that was it-- it'd be somewhat like the Northwest Annual at the L.A. Museum, that comprehensive, regional show and that type of thing. So it seemed to work out sending to the eastern shows.

BRUCE GUENTHER: '47 was the first year you rented a house on Lopez.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes, that would be after the war then, and we had been going to the Oregon coast for a while and were fascinated with that as a place to have a studio in, an outside place from here. And then we checked out the San Juan Islands for two or three years. And we lived then in the summer at this old homestead cabin on Lopez Island and used that as sort of a point of departure to see what was happening on the other islands. And thought Lopez seemed to be the best in all possible ways. And eventually, then, in '49, we bought about 85acres up there.
BRUCE GUENTHER: You were established now. It was after the war and the Seattle scene was starting to pick up. Students were coming back to the university to go to school. Cornish School was still active. Had you had any contact, you or FitzGerald, with the Cornish School here in Seattle?

MARGARET TOMKINS: No, none whatsoever.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Was it a different attitude or different community of artists then that were at Cornish?

MARGARET TOMKINS: You're probably speaking of the ones that worked with [John--Ed.] Cage and that type of thing that was pretty active right at that point. Well, I really couldn't say.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Yeah.

MARGARET TOMKINS: It was a happy situation not to have any affiliation with any educational institution and to try to figure out and solve everything on your own personal levels, out of that milieu.

BRUCE GUENTHER: So that the two of you, other than perhaps short-term things-- you were to go back and work at the U [University of Washington--Ed.] twice more I think-- but you really did do it without teaching?

MARGARET TOMKINS: That's right.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Support yourself with...

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes, and the Spokane little interval. Yes, we did it ourselves. And as I mentioned before, Jim had designed many things for buildings that had been designed by architects. Paul Thiry was probably the first architect that used art in the buildings. And so from then on there were different commissions for different--applied crafts, more at that time. For instance, at one period we did all the interiors for the library at Olympia. And that would be about eight inlaid mosaic tables out of marble and then the ten- or twelve-foot, ten-by-twelve-foot wall.

So some of those things were necessary, because each year we definitely removed ourselves from the scene here and had the three months up at the island, from June, or the end of May, to September. And that was the most intensive time for painting. And then due to school and economics, you'd have to return then in September, even though we'd liked to have stayed there. We did try it one year-- that was when we finally got a plan for our house going, our studio up there.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Right, the studio you started building after you got the land in '49.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Oh, we bought it in '48, and in '49 we started building it. And meanwhile we'd been staying at the farmhouse. And so we then used our energies for that full summer to construct the house. I've kept a diary since that period, every year, and particularly in that one year. It was completely untouched land and it looks pretty much untouched still. The character of it is fantastic because it borders the water all along, for about a mile, borders the Strait of Juan de Fuca and looks toward the Olympic Mountains. The nearest neighbor is about a mile away. And so we did it with just straight rock, glass, and timbers from the island.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Did you have an architect work with you?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Well, Jim graduated [in architecture--Ed.]. He did the designing; it's based on a five-point support system, and most of it's cantilevered. Oh, eventually, it'll probably burn down too. They have a very quaint way to fight fires up there. (chuckles) It's sort of volunteer, everybody volunteers to look at the fire and throw a little water on the ashes. So someday it'll look just like Stonehenge, because there'll be five supporting walls only.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Yes, because those are the great fieldstone walls.

MARGARET TOMKINS: That's right. Actually they were all gathered on the beaches. And we took two months to gather those. And you may wonder how I could have been any help, but during all these periods, from-- let's see-- I would say about '47, whenever we came up to the island, I had a girl that I would give instructions in art to that also took care of the children. And the same in Seattle.

BRUCE GUENTHER: So you'd have like an aupair who you'd give drawing lessons or something to?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Um hmm, and painting lessons. They were my surrogate victims, because they only had the same small amount of time that I would have had to do painting. But they had those two or three hours, and under instruction. And they had a wonderful place to get away to, up at that area. So that when in building the
house, she would take care of the children when I would be out on a ten-hour day working getting rocks and all that type of thing. That was very beneficial, you know, as far as getting the work done. Then we went up every summer, and lived at the place then finally. We just had gravel on the floor originally. And it looked very beautiful, because you could plant flowers into it, and flowers just come up through the gravel.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Through the gravel inside?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Right inside. And then finally we then collected rocks for the floor, inlaid those slabs that you've seen. They're all set down for the full floor.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Yeah. Those are wonderful with the mosaics, with the beach-polished stones. In '49-50, you started sort of a personal boycott of exhibiting at the Seattle Art Museum.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Um hmm.

BRUCE GUENTHER: That, I suppose, meshes with a number of things in your life. You'd indicated in an earlier conversation that there was a difference between the reality of the art scene, in your mind, and what the museum was doing, and so the museum was doing, and so you kind of withdrew from active exhibiting there.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Right.

BRUCE GUENTHER: But you certainly continued to be very active nationally, exhibiting.

MARGARET TOMKINS: The first time I exhibited again [at the Seattle Art Museum--Ed.], I think was 1960, '61, something like that. About the time of the World's Fair, because the painting I put in was purchased, and was given to the center [Seattle Center--Ed.] from that show. And that's the painting. They have a 1961 painting over there in the Repertory [Seattle Repertory Theater--Ed.] Playhouse [at the Seattle Center--Ed.].

And the reason for that [the boycott--Ed.] is the museum was unresponsive to the artists in the area. And most of them had enough to gain by thinking that something might happen, by not boycotting the museum. Mentally, they were doing it, but physically they were not putting it into application. They would still show and then complain afterwards when it was either "poor show" or "rejected" or whatever was the nature of their complaint. But it seemed that the museum at that time had its own-- it was a club. And the people that were involved in it were a part of the responsibility, which should have been responsible to public. And the controlling factor was when the curator was also art critic [referring to Kenneth Callahan--Ed.], and it was a very tied-in group. And so that there were many artists that just didn't think it should be encouraged any further. As I say, just probably ourselves and a few others would do much about it. And Bill Ivey had come up about that time after the war-- he'd been in the war, and shot up and so forth-- he came up [from San Francisco--Ed.] after the war to live in Seattle. And you finally just withdrew; that's all. Because there wasn't really enough support at the museum.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Well, that's a difficult period, with Kenneth Callahan at the museum and...

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes, he was the curator there then. And..

BRUCE GUENTHER: ...being an artist and a writer and...

MARGARET TOMKINS: Right. And it got rather annoying, you know, to have reviews of shows in which the critic would say, "and the author had this many paintings in," or "this painting was in," and then review his own painting. It was sort of incestuous, huh? Dr. Fuller, in himself, was a very shy, rather sensitive person, and tried to be really quite understanding of the artists' attitude. Particularly if you ever had like any economic problems, you know, he would always buy a painting to help you out, or something like that. But it was more within the public presentation; it was never per se against Dr. Fuller, but it was in the environmental group, the groups that surrounded him. And the contacts therefore, with any eastern-type galleries or any group shows or anything like that were pretty well cut off.

BRUCE GUENTHER: So that you felt there was an isolating of the community by the way information did or did not come through the museum.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Correct, yes.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Because Dr. Fuller, I think, had been supportive of your work in the forties, certainly.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Um hmm, um hmm. He would probably be mystified, although I had written letters that kind of explained my position, sort of to the point, and Jim's position too. So that he would understand. But you couldn't do much, really too much about it. And the controlling factor then went on for quite a period of time.

So it was around '59 then when a number of artists had been wondering about this situation for so long. And at
eventually [also] the University of Washington, which sort of had quite a bit of influence and control on things.
So at any rate, in '59, we started a gallery, and the object of that was to represent the most advanced young people starting in, and some of the more mature artists, and give this town a chance to see those people. And they were beautiful walls, big walls, so they could take big paintings. The few galleries here, two or three, just had small-scale [spaces--Bruce Guenther], you know, galleries in their homes, more or less.

BRUCE GUENTHER: In the fifties, the gallery scene must have been very sporadic. Zoe Dusanne was active.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yeah. Zoe Dusanne, and Selig-- Selig is it?

BRUCE GUENTHER: [Otto--Ed.] Seligman.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Seligman, right.

BRUCE GUENTHER: In the University District.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes, and Woodside had eventually there a little gallery in his own place. But it was just too limiting in scale, you know.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Yeah. Well, at that time, you had moved your scale-- for egg tempera I find really amazing--you were working on masonite. And some of them were four by eight feet?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Four by eight they got to, finally, and that was about it for weight and size. Furthermore the supporting material is no larger than four by eight, unless one worked on planks or something. So that had been pushed about as far as it could. But certainly it was the more typical of this area and supported by the museum to work on paper and work small. And so the little galleries that showed the work...

[ Interruption ]

BRUCE GUENTHER: It's interesting to me that you were working that large in egg tempera, recognizing the limitations of the local scene, that then these paintings would go out to shows in Colorado Springs, and the Whitney, and Denver, the Art Institute of Chicago, San Francisco again. You were in a number of traveling shows. Who were you looking at? You were obviously in a national scene at the point. If we think of the fifties, all of us are trained to think of the New York School and Abstract Expressionism. What were the synthesis of things that were pulling into you? Were you and FitzGerald traveling much at that period?

MARGARET TOMKINS: No. You know, with the children, you couldn't travel, either from responsibility or economics, one way or the other. You probably mind-traveled, and if you've seen anything that's extremely fine-- as I said earlier, in the early formative periods-- it sets one's standards high. Except for one trip we got into New York, and that would be in-- let's see, when that would be. Went to Europe in '62; that was a great experience, and that was-- of course, [we--Ed.] took in New York then. But the stimulus in the painting is really, I guess-- it really within anybody is-- your own intuitive and creative levels. And you do have to set some perceptions of what you're going to accept in your own work. And I found that exploration of my own energies was sufficient for me without much input from the outside. And within our system-- you could call it a system because with five people in a relatively small place, something has to be systematized (chuckles)-- we were both within the urge to search for the maximum expression within whatever direction one was working at the time. And in that concept, then, we would have regular periods of working. And were noncompetitive, which is unique, particularly I think for a male; in my experience in that, and from input from my daughter and other people, the tolerance level for male for competition from the female is rather negligible. And in our case, our sights were on person to person type of thing. It was supportive or critical, but not in the sense of hurting anybody to the degree that it would warp our relationship. It was on a much more stimulating and higher level within the creative sense.

BRUCE GUENTHER: So that you reinforced each other in your efforts and...?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Exactly, exactly, yes. And renewed when, like in every period of creativity, you have the extremes of feeling that things are getting better and certain kinds of things are getting worse. And so to have some backup on that, or when you're wasting your energies in the wrong directions, it was, you know, a formidable supportive thing. And of course, you do wonder how you could do it, probably in retrospect, but I think probably with five people there, that it's that sort of thing. And the children were raised within that creative sense themselves. It's the best of all possible lives. Even with all its elements of despair and difficulties and economic stress.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Gala was born in 1951, and then the summers on Lopez and working commissions, must have very close. In 1958 you were involved, along with FitzGerald, in starting a short-lived-- but what I think sounds very exciting-- the Artists Gallery on Olive Way. And it was with Louis Bunce, Bill Ivey, Manuel Izquierdo,
and Alden Mason. It seems like Seattle doesn't have a very strong history of cooperative, artist-run galleries, whereas Portland always has.

MARGARET TOMKINS: In fact, they didn't exist in Seattle, except for that one time. Well, it was based on those energies that were being deflected by having no place to look at the artists' work, you know, that originated the idea. So we finally just got together, and there were a couple artists who didn't feel that they could be responsive [to--Ed.] this idea. But it was a very simple principle on which it originated. It was designed to go a year, possibly longer. The area, the space was great, and then each artist didn't put any-- I think they put $100 in it, each artist, and then each artist would give five paintings, five small paintings. And that would be 25 paintings, and each of those paintings was a membership and it guaranteed then for the... With a membership, you got one of those small paintings! So somebody has some of mine, and some of FitzGerald's, and some of Ivey's. The membership, I think, was $100, so that would give you $2500.

BRUCE GUENTHER: So for that sum, the public... If I had been around then, I would, say, give you $200 and I could select two of the small works.

MARGARET TOMKINS: I think you could have done it for a hundred.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Ah. Yes. (laughter)

MARGARET TOMKINS: You would have a little area where the artists had their smaller paintings about like this, or whatever size, you know. And then the new member could pick from one of those things, so not only we got the membership but immediate funding.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Yeah.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Bill Ivey taught some art classes there, during a summer. And that brought in funding, and then we had poetry readings and music there, evening groupings. So it was a very live center, I think.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Very bohemian.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Oh, I think it sounds very practical. That's what made it work, for even that period.

BRUCE GUENTHER: All right, with poetry and music, it sounds very fifties, very Kerouac and slightly beatnik. Well, I know Louis Bunce referred to it as an exciting experiment for him, coming up from Portland and...

MARGARET TOMKINS: Um hmm, um hmm! And then we used to also serve liquor or wine, and so for the originating artists it was just always one exhausting period a month.

BRUCE GUENTHER: (laughs) So did you take turns keeping it open to the public, or was it just open for specific...

MARGARET TOMKINS: No, we hired a woman.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Oh, you did?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes, oh yeah. We had a person there all the time. The artists couldn't go that far to sell their own things; that'd be really unfortunate. So yeah, we had that. The paintings that were sold would net, I don't know, 25 percent, I think it was, something like that. That applied to the originating artists, went back into the funds, as well as the other people. So a lot of the people from the university and younger people that had not been shown before were shown there.

BRUCE GUENTHER: And it was a gallery with a very abstract orientation, I would think, knowing the artists.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Um hmm, it definitely was. A few realistic things might creep in. (laughter)

BRUCE GUENTHER: They were accidents on the side.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yeah.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Well, it was on Olive Way?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes, right, where there's something, Henry's or something, some eating establishment now? I think his name was Seigels who owned the building. Marjorie Seigels, she's a patron.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Oh, Marge Siegels, yes.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yeah! She has some of the paintings from that effort. Either for rent or for membership. You see it was a brand new building, and they never used the area. They liked the idea of artists and the gallery
in the building, and then they had their big deal up above, with their interior design and all that.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Oh, I see. So it was the lower floor of the building that's now Henry's Off Broadway [1705 East Olive Way--Bruce Guenther].

MARGARET TOMKINS: That's right. It'd be the lower part where you could just drive in; it was excellent for openings and really a good space.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Oh, I see.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Do you know her very well?

BRUCE GUENTHER: Oh yes. And I, I didn't realize that's where it was!

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yeah!

BRUCE GUENTHER: Another "big" of the lore.

MARGARET TOMKINS: It would've been nice to go on long but it didn't seem to regenerate itself for another year or so.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Well, so that was in '58, and then in '59, the fire happens.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Uh huh.

BRUCE GUENTHER: July 13th you had a fire here in the studio.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes, I wasn't here at the time; I was down in California. My mother was in the final stages of cancer and she died shortly thereafter. So I had just arrived down there and then I got a telephone call that the studio and the house had burned down. And the result of that was, I came right back, and there wasn't anything left of it, that's true. There was just piles of burned wood. It had really done a very devastating job. Except for a painting I had down in, I think, Portland, and a couple of other paintings around, everything was burned up. That had happened from 1940 to 1959, so you're looking at about 20 years of work. Except for a few sketchbooks-- which I might show you since you're here-- that kind of survived. And nobody got hurt in the fire. It started from just-- well, you heat lost wax for making bronze and the wax got too hot and it exploded and that was in the kitchen, and the whole place went up.

BRUCE GUENTHER: So FitzGerald and the children got out.

MARGARET TOMKINS: _____ Jim, let's see-- Yes, Jim was outside already and so were the children, luckily. Had they been inside, there might have been a major problem getting them out. But that was the source of the fire. It was pretty devastating. And we had just gotten another house up the street, because with everybody being so much older at this point the children-- Miro was about twelve then, Jared about fourteen-- the confines of the studio and just trying to live were too tight anyway. So we had already gotten this other place but it simplified moving because we didn't have anything to move.

BRUCE GUENTHER: (chuckles) That's right.

MARGARET TOMKINS: And people then gave us lots of things for survival. And we adjusted to it. What happened then on painting or your art career for each of us was rather a strong plus and a strong minus. Jim's work had been, he had been working in the last two or three years and experimenting in bronze-- small castings, abstract figurative ones, somewhat like that smaller one there. [pointing to one in the studio--Ed.] And a few of the bronzes then went through the fire. And he really then, from that point on, focused on casting bronze. When you saw the devastation to panels with tempera on them, you would turn off.

BRUCE GUENTHER: So he abandoned painting.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Um hmm, right.

BRUCE GUENTHER: He'd been doing some mosaic and painting and...

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes.

BRUCE GUENTHER: A real mix, but not focused on sculpture.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Well, not mosaic. See, he'd been doing paintings and then the craft jobs were things we both joined in to bring in the economy. But a number of his paintings were-- most of the shows that you were
speaking of FitzGerald's were in too, his paintings. So that it was quite a major shift to move from that to oil. And so the larger-scale bronzes that he began to work in, went up to 20 feet tall and so forth, were all, I think, premised on the thing of destructibility of paint material.

And as far as myself, two years later, in '61 then, it was the first trip I'd ever made to Europe and we went over there. And that was really exciting to see the continuum, the agelessness of art, and that one man's little problems was not the answer, and the answer was to maximize again your own potential. You only have one time to fool around with the subject, one time to put all your energies in. So when I came back, then, I dropped tempera completely; as I said earlier on, it had gotten to be about the maximum size for portability and craftsmanship. And I started working in oils. And they were large size.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Your mother then was terminally ill and died sort of around the...

MARGARET TOMKINS: She died three weeks after the fire.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Oh, so that it took you a year or two to really sort of pull back and...

MARGARET TOMKINS: Well, we had no place to live, and then also Jim was in the midst of doing the library screen that was made out of glass; it's about 22 feet long by 8 feet tall, and that all burned up. So he had to do it all over.

BRUCE GUENTHER: That was the screen for the Seattle Public Library.

MARGARET TOMKINS: That is correct, yes. Which is all handfired in glass and brass and so forth. And so that had to be done all over again. It was about ready for installation. And then there was a piece of sculpture that was going to be in the commission, a large one that was in wax, that was all burned up, that was about 11 feet. And so forth. So there, a year it took to even get beginning again. And of course psychologically it was devastating.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Yeah. Well, for me, it's interesting to see what emerged, out of that fire, because the paintings, the shift to oil and the way they open up, I've always found that they were some of the most moving paintings I've seen of yours. And the color-- you push color away for a while in those works. They were very black and gray and these whites that go toward umber.

MARGARET TOMKINS: With a few, emphasis of, not color, toward the oranges once in a while or red perhaps. I did make before that, just after the fire-- and that would have been in that Henry Gallery show-- about six or seven, five or seven, whatever the number, of tempera paintings, not commemorative of the fire but in retrospect they look commemorative, and they were in tempera.

And so after that, it was then the trip to Europe and then just the straight oil. Those were painted up on Lopez. There's a lot of space there for evaluation. You can move off a couple hundred feet or thirty feet or whatever. This scale is fabulous to work in, from that sense of being able to look at your work from a distance. The work then was in oil, and all those were done on the floor. I still work not against a wall, but on the floor. And the canvas painting on the floor, the materials were oil-- and tube oil really-- and not glazed, and it was applied with a spatula, about a three-inch wide by ten-inch spatula, on the floor. And so a great number of those were done just within one summer or two summers. And you'd have to then restretch them to bring them down from the island, or unstretch them and restretch them in town.

BRUCE GUENTHER: In '61 then, one of those paintings, White Umber, was purchased and installed in the then new Seattle Repertory Playhouse.

MARGARET TOMKINS: That's true, yes. That was the first year I'd shown at the museum for a number of years. And so Mr. Selig [Manfred Selig--Ed.] bought that and gave it to the city.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Did you find yourself using drawing then? Did you keep sketchbooks in this period? You'd lost almost everything in the fire, except perhaps books that survived. Did drawings emerge then with these more...?

MARGARET TOMKINS: No, they [the paintings--Ed.] were done just directly.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Just directly.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Absolutely. There's no preliminary studies, and within a relatively short time. No preliminary. In fact I have given that up, somehow since the fifties, the preliminary drawing on any of the works. You may work within a series of sketches that refer to the general direction-- but not in those '60 paintings-- a general solution of what you're thinking of as far as line or volume or that. Or maybe you're trying out an interesting color relationship in some of those. But as far as any details from real, on a realistic sense, from forms that would be about one, no; I don't usually do that any more. The days like up on the island when I used to trade paintings for fish are gone! (laughter) I'd do watercolors of the purse seiners and then row out and
they'd throw me some fish and I'd give them the painting.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Well, that's great! When did you do that? The summers when you were renting the farmhouse?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yeah, right! Because we didn't have an outboard motor and we didn't have a rowboat, so it's hard to catch salmon without either of those things.

BRUCE GUENTHER: (laughs)

MARGARET TOMKINS: I caught one salmon, I think, in five years. (laughter)

BRUCE GUENTHER: And of course salmon is the preferred fish!

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes. And then finally I got more sophisticated; I appealed to their stomachs, and then would bake wild blackberry pies, and they would eat, very happy to trade fish for wild blackberry pie. (chuckles)

BRUCE GUENTHER: Oh, that's wonderful! (chuckles)

MARGARET TOMKINS: And finally they'd be coming in the bay, you know, and say, "Do you have any of those blackberry pies?" (laughs) Trade and barter.

BRUCE GUENTHER: The shift in the art scene from that period, the late forties and the fifties, to the present, is one of a lessening of the independence to a degree? And also a less innocent, direct approach to the process.

MARGARET TOMKINS: I think you may be right, um hmm. A great deal of input, that often is rather thin-- The amount the individual receives may be not accurate, but you can base a lot of hours in thinking and realities on misinformation. And that comes from using somebody else's thoughts, not creating limits within yourselves and arriving at a solution yourself, hmm?

BRUCE GUENTHER: In '62, you were a guest professor at the art department at the University of Washington.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes! That's true. Boyer Gonzales invited me, I believe, to that. And it was graduate students and seniors. And the Healds were there then, Larry Heald and his brother [Paul Heald--Ed.], and Larry Beck, the sculptor, and quite a number of the people that are very serious artists these days. And I found that to be pretty exciting, because everybody was on a decent level of knowledge, you know. It was really fun. And again, I only taught a semester, so that was just the right amount. I think it's pretty destructive if one makes a full career of teaching, but if you're forced to, you could.

BRUCE GUENTHER: That same time, you had a one-person exhibit at the Henry Gallery and Gervais Reed wrote a catalog for it.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes, right! And that was the first time-- Well, let's put it this way. What year is that?

BRUCE GUENTHER: 1962.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Okay. I had the show at the Henry Gallery in '62, probably because I taught there was the only initiating point, a sort of honorarium, you know, for teaching there. So this is the first chance to show all this big output of 1962, right? And then the few temperas that were right after the fire. Well, the next time those were shown were 1980.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Umm!

MARGARET TOMKINS: Which shows how active this place is. In this town. Twenty years later was the first time, except for the one at the Playhouse, and the one time they showed at the art museum [Museum of Art, Washington State University--Ed.], any of the paintings that were in that full show were shown at a gallery. And that would mean that either the walls were too small or there wasn't enough interest. In '59 they weren't done, so I couldn't have shown them there at the Artists' Gallery. And a few were starting to show at a gallery, Don Scott's Gallery.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Right. And you exhibited there in '64.

MARGARET TOMKINS: And that would have been the only time that those have been shown. In fact, it was only recently, at Diane Gilson Gallery, that those had been brought out. Shown at [Gordon--Ed.] Woodside's, and that's too small for them.

BRUCE GUENTHER: And then some of those were shown in the retrospective at Washington State University
MARGARET TOMKINS: Oh, I'm talking about galleries. Yes, of course, the museum there.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Tom Robbins was writing about art, in the sixties, for the Seattle Times...

MARGARET TOMKINS: And independently too.

BRUCE GUENTHER: How did it begin to shift? Did you see yourself in relationship to William Ivey and Louis Bunce? You'd showed with them periodically in group shows and then with the artists' space. How did you define your community? Who were the people that you talked with? You and FitzGerald had a very strong relationship as far as your interchange. Who else in the community were you involved with as artists?

MARGARET TOMKINS: I think we almost became self-sufficient; we didn't have too many other contacts. Due to the Artists' Gallery, contacts developed through those artists that... There was some connection with Jim with Louis Bunce, something to do with back in Kansas City-- I forget what that was. We'd never seen him particularly before that. But we respected his art. And Ivey, we'd seen him a few times around Seattle and naturally after being together off and on for a year, he became a good friend. And those are the two out of that artists' group that I think I responded to the most. And you were speaking about the Tom Robbins thing. He had a nice brisk way of dealing with the art scene, as far as cleaning the air and pointing out (chuckles) certain directional points that were happening. His target at that time I recall was the University of Washington.

BRUCE GUENTHER: He found things to look at in a critical fashion.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes. Monopolistic control he thought too, in which teachers to students, and then as artists, and then students chosen and so forth, that more tied-in type of relationships can exist, and there wasn't much to counter that direction. At least that was his focus, and that was one parameter that you could work on. And he had a very good insight, though, into paintings, through different people. He'd waken interest in certain people you'd never heard of. And if you responded and went to the show, it often proved of interest. I'm very supportive of trying to let the young people be seen. Let anybody that's doing good interesting work be seen in enough intervals that they don't just drop out of the picture, 'cause everybody isn't a member of a support team like I had. And if you get enough negative you finally, it's less desirous and noncreative. It's not too usable. So that the support of the artists is a very good thing.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Well, I think something that Seattle has had off and on is that you'll find artists creating new clusters of support, because the commercial scene has never been very strong, and the museum's response, as you've noted, rises and falls, unfortunately not with the regularity of a wave. (both chuckle) A capricious breeze, perhaps.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Right. Well, do you find that with the increase in galleries that there's less responsibility a museum should have in showing work of the contemporary artists?

BRUCE GUENTHER: I think perhaps there's less impetus to do huge survey shows and more opportunity to do selective, intensive looks at the relationship between certain kinds of works or certain artists' works, or to look at one body of work by an artist.

MARGARET TOMKINS: The less collective shows, you mean? Not like, say, Northwest Annual that would go from really mediocre to quite excellent.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Yes, right.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Uh huh. The Museum of Modern Art made an interesting stab at showing what's happening, and letting people reach their own conclusions.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Yes.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Kaleidoscopic period it is right now, though, so artists I'm sure reflect that. And there are 165 or something like that [artists in Museum of Modern Art survey--Bruce Guenther]? [I think they're talking about a show titled 65.---TR]

BRUCE GUENTHER: Yeah, and I think the collective response has been: "There's no point to this show!" (laughs) But the point of the show was to survey.

MARGARET TOMKINS: The point of the show is that: there isn't any point.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Um hmm.
MARGARET TOMKINS: I'm sure there will be enough semanticists saying, and critics, to finally define certain elements of it, and already has been. But the whole thing is in a kaleidoscopic flux right now. And the show probably says that. I think everybody's going to have or is thinking a show has to have a stressed point, and I know the pressures on the museum people to have that type of show, where it defines scholarly, visually, a perception and has reached a conclusion, true or false. And there are areas of art in which the deviation is the message; not the cohesiveness within direction because there's never, in any time, I don't think, just one direction. That is, unless the museum wants to pull that out, or a gallery'll pull it out, you know.

[Tape 2; side A]

BRUCE GUENTHER: We were talking about the sixties and the community that you were involved with and the self-containment of FitzGerald and yourself. It was a very active period for both of you. It was also... I remember the painting, particularly Assassination, which although an abstract work, was a response very definitely to the first part of the sixties and Kennedy's death. You began to experiment with a great deal more color. The scale stayed large, but your palette started getting broader: reds, and blues, and orange and green. What was causing that? Was it a shift in medium, again? Or was it just the way it kept moving?

MARGARET TOMKINS: I think part of the thing was the split levels, one's realities that my perceptions and management of my own creative levels were certainly intruded on and affected in my art in the World War II. The title of one was Fragrance of Fear, and the one that was recently given by Sherman Lee is called-- somebody was remarking the other day that paintings of the forties often have very complicated titles and mine would prove that-- and his was Tragic Balance of Destiny? Well, I mean, really. So now I don't sign them and I often just put numbers. But it was a creative event. They were speaking of Graves' show up there [Vision of the Inner Eye, then being shown at the Seattle Art Museum--Ed.], how much part without the titles; it helps a great deal in pointing within an abstract sense, guiding the visual image of the observer. Respective of the sixties, it was such a chaotic time, with deaths and assassinations that it intruded upon one's sort of idyllic way of life, or your focus and concentration. And so the result was that you would just be painting and there would be another assassination. It would be Kennedy's first, then Martin Luther King and so forth. And the inequities within the so-called American democracy's that were going on would begin to affect you. Marches, which we frequently participated in. So that it was intrusion of a certain sense of reality that made for a bit of translation of the events into a recognition of the events within a creative sense. And so the assassination, like you were speaking of the oil, and two or three others of that time, and then also a series I did that were painting on glass, which was acrylic on glass, that were comments on the black scene and assassinations, and I did about 20 of those, probably. And then with the color and I'd been kind of fascinated with the response that was possible in painting with fluorescents in color, and I worked for a couple of years in that later sixties then, within what fluorescence will do to a red or a gray or in a normal color range. And in the rather large scale on that.

BRUCE GUENTHER: The studio we're sitting in here on Tenth Street you rebuilt at some point. You'd moved the family up the street to the house. When did you rebuild this space?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Oh, it was done a month after, the next 30 days after the fire.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Ah! So you immediately came back and rebuilt the studio?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes. Because we had to use it as a studio also to produce some work that were commissioned jobs: the Washington Building [Seattle--Ed.] sculpture that's bronze, about 12 feet by 25 feet, was in the process of being made and there was no place to make it. So Jim, after the fire then, rented a building to do the library screen again, and then for the Washington Building we had poured-- there was nothing left of the house except one room that could be saved, which was about 20 by 12, the other room, where the floor is all burned-- and then we poured a slab, made a good studio, which we're sitting in now. It's a good north light, and that was the area then that the bronze sculpture was welded up together. We didn't have our own foundry at that time-- there was an old fellow that used to live out toward Kenmore, a really skilled caster in lost wax-- and so Jim used to take the investment materials out there, but transporting lost wax investment materials that
distance is pretty damaging. So eventually we built our own foundry.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Where is that foundry? You still use that.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Oh, yes. It's a fine building. It's at the south end of Lake Union, looks north over Lake Union. Again, Jim designed it, and then in collaboration with engineers and that type of thing, for the stress factor, because it's all on glaciated material there, and there's more cement probably in the foundations than in all the buildings that were... So that made an ideal two-story building [to fire?] and about 24-foot-high concrete block walls, an excellent place to do the whole process: the casting, which would be the making of the actual object. Often the small-scale models or small-scale ideas'd be done during the summer at Lopez, and then translated into large wax patterns, and then we had the foundry room with the furnace and we had the casting. When we got back in '62, the Playhouse fountain was not cast at our foundry; we didn't have it then. But the later sculptures that were cast there are located at the Princeton University, and Ogden, Utah-- in fact, it's for the Federal...where you pay your income tax [Federal Office Building--Ed.]; right in front of it is a large-scale FitzGerald fountain, which hasn't reduced my income taxes or added to it. (laughter) As I recall, they didn't even look out the window.

BRUCE GUENTHER: When you moved the sculpture did you then take over the studio space for painting exclusively? Or where were you painting during this period?

MARGARET TOMKINS: The place had been rebuilt here. So where we're sitting now, with the concrete floors and the big north window, you could use for painting. And the walls hadn't been plasterboarded or anything; it's just insulation, you know, so it could work pretty well for painting. And then Jim would use the foundry for the heavy-- I never used that for painting or anything like that.

BRUCE GUENTHER: You seem to have found a balance between the two of you that was mutually supportive, unlike many creative couples who are both artists. There are those times in careers when one career is more noticeable than another, and then there's this sort of rising and falling of the individual career. How did the two of you handle that? I'm hearing you saying that when FitzGerald had a big commission to get out, there was an amount of time that you just threw into helping get that commission out.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Well, I think as far as my work in relation to his sculptural work, it was heavy-duty work and I really wasn't that involved in it. Somewhere the story's gotten out to that level [of doing heavy work--Ed.]; I wasn't that involved. The casting in itself was dangerous and a heavy-duty job-- I would help in pouring investments, that kind of thing-- which means several hundred pounds of liquid material that you pour in forms. But except for these smaller pieces, where I might help in cleaning them up-- anybody that works in bronze knows they look pretty much a wreck when they come out of the first casting with all the gates where the metal has come into the form, cut off by bandsaw or hacksaw, and then the whole thing to be cleaned. I would help on that level, but as far as his big-scale jobs, I really didn't do anything. And since Jim did about twelve, I would say, of those large ones, I wasn't that occupied with that at all. So I had a certain amount of time for painting; the children by then were into high school and starting in college, so they were beginning to be moving on their own.

BRUCE GUENTHER: It's always that question of how you balance out the two careers. It seems you've always maintained an active attitude about the studio. There was an article I remember that Tom Robbins wrote where he interviewed five or six Seattle women painters. I remember reading this article, and you were sort of his wrap-up artist, the last one he talked about. And where the other women had talked about not much time and they didn't focus much on their work, your statement was very-- it was '64 or '65-- it was so clear about, "I work every day at some point. The only way it develops is if you're in the studio. The family takes care of itself." I found that very impressive to be saying in '64, and it's something that women artists today are still trying to say. I think everyone faces...

MARGARET TOMKINS: And us all. Well, if they're complex and confused before they have children, they'll only get more so. And if you have a certain clarity and balance-- and I must say quite a bit of energies-- the scheduling of one's own time and the relationship of the family time can be done and doesn't deprive a balanced emotional life for the children; they're not orphans. And being a part of the whole scene was part of their life. In that I meant that they each had their opportunity to work within their own realm. And had a certain area of sort of creative energy where eventually, then, they were on their own, in their own lifestyle. The initial periods where you're grappling with absolute tiny ones is somewhat harrassing, you know; they're often painting on the lower part of your picture while you're working on the upper part. (laughter) I think maybe a little sense of humor helps you get through a few things. And not to make everything chaos; to just take it as an aberration of the moment and not something based on a contingent that's going to happen every day. Or you might cut your throat. (laughter)

But you were asking about the ups and downs about careers. Well, naturally ideally, you'd want it to all be plus...
all the time, but there are those periods. And that is when the other person reinforces the other, if you're having some good breaks going or something of that nature. Nothing is happening on the other, well-- I mean, it just reverses itself at another time, so if you have any philosophy toward a continuum, if you don't think of that one moment, that one action as being destructive to your confidence in yourself. Because the other person, if you don't have the perspective on it, will reinforce your idea that you're still a great artist; just because you didn't get such and such or something happened, you know. A good balance. I've never been involved with women because I think they start very often having bad habits and it doesn't become less; they sometimes then get to a point where they feel they've been abused. But I think that being misused by lack of support or rejection because of their sex-- and I think within certain jobs, job levels there could very well be that focus where somebody gets underpaid, while the old man right next to them doing the same thing gets more-- but in terms of art, in most cases, it's fairly anonymous anyway. It takes a bit to ever even find who painted the painting, unless that person is well known. So you can't say you've been rejected because you name's Gwendolyn or something. It's probably because it's just a poor painting. So I have never really gotten too much excitement out of thinking about that women have been pushed aside by reason of their sex, except within the art field. I may be naive.

BRUCE GUENTHER: I think everyone's experience of the situation is slightly different because of their...

MARGARET TOMKINS: I think so. I think probably it has an element though, even in the beginning, because I've always used my own name, for instance, not my married name. And I often didn't use Margaret with it; M. Tomkins or just Tomkins, and that was probably some means of self-protection. So there could be that element, you know, that just was kind of built-in in the beginning.

BRUCE GUENTHER: You've always seen yourself as a professional artist?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Um hmm. You mean by professional, you mean that'll be it?

BRUCE GUENTHER: Yeah.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes. Yes, that's...

BRUCE GUENTHER: No desire to be a computer scientist?

MARGARET TOMKINS: No. (laughter) No, I've had a focus on that ever since I've been in the teens, and it hasn't dissipated. You find other things within the field, like, for instance, I mentioned a while ago that I was recently working in some etching. You do expand into other materials within the field, where I've worked in bronze. And all of those changes are very exciting, but it doesn't mean, as you say, that you'd switch to a whole 'nother profession.

BRUCE GUENTHER: In '73, you spent six weeks traveling in Greece and Turkey. And that was also the year that FitzGerald died.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Um hmm.

BRUCE GUENTHER: That was again one of those points in one's life where things came together, and...

MARGARET TOMKINS: Or fell apart.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Or fell apart, as we were talking.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Right. Well, that was '72, yes. '73 we went over there. And actually the job at the university, Jim was supposed to be teaching there; he thought it might be interesting. But he was getting into the nature of multiple melanoma, and when he arrived, the first day, he couldn't handle it. So I took over the class.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Oh, so that's how you ended up with the university again.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Teaching those architects about drawing. And so I took over that quarter then, teaching, and then...

BRUCE GUENTHER: And his condition continued to...?

MARGARET TOMKINS: And then, well, it had a period in which everything seemed pretty good: remission, I think they call it, and that's when we went to Europe. We went over there in '73, for about a month, in December to January, and by the time we came back, by September he just was out of control. So Jim died then in that year, September.
BRUCE GUENTHER: He was in the middle of a big bronze sculpture commission.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes! He had gotten a very large piece of work to do for Century City down in Los Angeles, which is a big complex there that has theaters and so forth, and that was going to be about 30 feet high, three pieces about 30 feet high. And it was for the Alcoa Company, and so it had to be out of aluminum and that kind of thing. And so, yes, he had it all— in fact, right now, all of the water systems and the piping are all in there. I think they’ve planted geraniums instead. And the models had all been approved. And I offered to finish it for them, but I don’t think they thought that a woman could do it. (chuckles) In any case, I don’t damn them. It would have been a major job, so in retrospect very shortly thereafter I was glad I didn’t have that job.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Yeah.

MARGARET TOMKINS: So that’s focused on that. The Waterfront Park sculpture...

BRUCE GUENTHER: You ended up doing the Seattle Waterfront Park piece?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes, right. A lot of patterns on that, too, to make and the casting. I didn’t cast it, but I got the person to cast it. And that took about a year of time. And so that was really the last fountain.

BRUCE GUENTHER: And after that, you closed down the foundry?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yeah, I really just shut it up; I just left it alone and stored things there. And then a couple of years of rented it, but...

BRUCE GUENTHER: And you pretty much lived on Lopez Island since ’75 or so?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes. After I was through with this sculpture, which as I say, had taken about a year of complicated work. They’re nice to want, but they’re very complicated to finish. (I’ve gotten) a great more understanding of Jim’s problems when I got through with that. And so then I left town, and have lived up on the islands ever since, on Lopez Island. And it’s a fabulous place for doing one’s own time in one’s own work.

BRUCE GUENTHER: The work, it seems to me, since then has been about planes of light and color, and it has an openness to it that is almost ephemeral, almost ethereal.

MARGARET TOMKINS: I think you do pick up something of part of your environment: some’s in your head and some’s what you see. The scenes of the changing seasons, and, as I think I said once, real seasons and seasons of the mind, because my mind was certainly in a different place than when I was over in Turkey and Greece on my little recent trip, then, after losing Jim there... It reinforced my ideas of searching for the maximum understatement that I was able to do. The removal toward the source as much as I could. And the ambiguity in my art, or the paintings, whatever. Leaves enough speculation, interpretation— to the viewer and to myself even— as to the areas of appearance and disappearance, and the perceptions of depth. So that it has that changing scene, that compared to nature is that it’s always in flux, but unlike nature, within a controlled condition.

BRUCE GUENTHER: You’ve painted for the last, maybe, 15 years in acrylics primarily.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yeah, I think that would be something like it, um hmm. ’70.

BRUCE GUENTHER: The way that handles— you’ve gone from watercolor and oil, to egg tempera, to oil, to acrylic, and it seems it’s that aqueous into highly viscous and then back to an aqueous kind of flowing transparency in these works.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Um hmm. The geometry or the angles of it is more a stress than the curvilinear. The silence has always been a nice part of the work. I was rather surprised the other day; I was down at the foundry where I’ve rented to glassblowers. And here they are in the creative process making glass and they’re chattering like birds! And I’ve never been near anybody that was creating something— you might get a few sounds, but in general you couldn’t really run a conversation, you know. (both chuckle) The absolute antithesis of that was just 24 hours every day. Except wonderful inventive sounds that occur outside. Or if I play music, I mean play recordings, and that kind of thing, that would provide your own sound. But it’s nothing laid on top of you that’s upsetting or changing, raucous noise.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Because the island [terrain—Ed.] drops at that point... It must make everything very interior, very much inside. Interiority of the work. And your life now.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Um hmm, um hmm.

BRUCE GUENTHER: From the compression of the family and FitzGerald and your work and the kind of compression that your life was at. Now this is opening up, and yet the isolation of the island. It must be
MARGARET TOMKINS: I find it so. The only problems with generally living is not having enough time to do what you want to, for all of us. Right? And if you've finally found enough time and you've already had sort of a balanced way of using minimal time, and then here you get quite a bit of time, you have really quite a few hours there for what you want to do and exploration in many directions: intellectually, or by reading or... I'm afraid I do read a lot. That since the nights come down early in the Northwest and in time away from painting, then-- you usually get about six hours of painting a day, four to six. And I vary it though. I don't want to get locked in there and become quite a hermit, so I vary the pattern by getting to Seattle or once in a while to New York or other things, although I haven't been back to New York for about six years.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Your children, Jared, Miro, are both artists. Gala is...

MARGARET TOMKINS: She studied art at the university, and she was quite good at it, and she also worked in writing and poetry, and so she got her degree at the Montana [University of--Ed.], in writing and she does a great deal of that and she also is married, lives in San Francisco. And the others, my son is in New York, has been for about ten years. And Miro is back in the Northwest, although she was in New York in the Bronx and doing traveling fellowships and that type of thing over quite a few period, years. So everybody seems to be doing fine in their own lifestyle. How many people have you interviewed with regard to this, their reminiscences?

BRUCE GUENTHER: You're the second.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Who was the other?

BRUCE GUENTHER: Rachael Griffin. Curator of the Portland Art Museum.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes, yes. Well, I was hoping you'd come up to the island to do it.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Well, I was too actually. (laughs) It's the silence and...

MARGARET TOMKINS: You can come up and ask one question. You can say, "Am I well?" and I'll say, "Yes." You can take that.

BRUCE GUENTHER: We've sort of covered after... '77 was the retrospective at Pullman, at the museum there at WSU [Washington State University--Ed.]. Then in '78, you had major shows at Evergreen State College, and the Whatcom Museum [Bellingham--Ed.], and then the Bellevue Art Museum gave you...

MARGARET TOMKINS: That was a couple of years ago.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Yeah, in '81. It's been, again, an increase in the activity. And the paintings which people hadn't seen for a while sort of re-emerged for them, these new acrylic paintings.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes, I've never had gallery shows very frequently. By that I mean, three years' interval has never bothered me any. And it gives me a sense to really evaluate the ones that were done over the period of years. And speaking of that, it's been about three years, I think, I was noticing the other day, since my last gallery show. So the museums have sort of replaced that.

BRUCE GUENTHER: We've talked about the artists, the issues about being a woman and an artist, and a mother, a wife, those kind of independence and dependence issues. Maybe you should think about what other things you would like to discuss.

[Break in taping]

MARGARET TOMKINS: About a year ago.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Oh, the Bush Foundation?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes. And it operates out of Minneapolis, and gives $25,000 away in the different fields of creative enterprise, and I was on the final jury on that last year, flew back for that; I was the one for two-dimensional, three-dimensional art, and Dave Wagner was in for writing, and there was the video thing and the photographs and so forth. But it was remarkable going back there that you could see the inputs, then, of the sculptors you went to see, or the painters, that they weren't that far from New York, one fellow particularly. I just asked when was he in New York; he got back three months ago. And what that sort of sums-- I mean, where people are available, as an award, and they give it every year, and of course they run out of artists, obviously, and they can even renew it after two years; it's such a rich area for funding that I think it's running out of material. I suggested to some artists here that they just move back there. You need to get a liquor license and driver thing and electric blanket and then apply after 65 days. You could put up with it for that!
BRUCE GUENTHER: Sure.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Their writing seemed to be quite creative, and probably are locked in more _____. But speaking of influences, you could see it, you know.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Well, I think over the years in looking at the Northwest artists you see the way... There's an indigenous vision that develops, that artists who choose to live and work here develop. They're aware of what's happening around them-- and outside-- but they continue to develop on a personal course. I think the way your work has developed over the years. In the forties-- you'd mentioned earlier people like Ernst and Matta. Were they artists that you had thought about in the forties?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Oh yes, because I'd seen some excellent examples of the work, not in New York, because I didn't get back there in the forties, but in the collections in L.A. There was really a very large show of Max Ernst work too. And Matta and Hayter, those people that were of such strong influence; you can see it in Pollock's work and in many that were stimulating things for the development of more subjective release and flow directly from the artist to his media. And not to be limited to what was so typical of the thirties, just looking at the cornfields and making the paintings-- or looking at the Northwest and painting just the environment. So it was a national thing and it was transferred then. I was noticing one article on Matta, I believe, that did large scale, which of course, I guess, Pollock and a number of other people finally got working into. Was very much brought in in the forties and all those people came in after the war effort, so it was a real revitalization of American art at that time. And a certain amount of knowledge seeped in in the Northwest, I imagine.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Yeah. Well, certainly the big shows that you were in, like the Pepsi Cola Company exhibits, that were sponsored after the war, where you were winning prizes, those included artists from all over America. It seems to me that Pollock was in one of those shows.

MARGARET TOMKINS: That's true, yes. Very top names like-- the scale of reference begins to be so distorted later because so many of the artists have become quite well-known people, and you can see them represented in something that doesn't happen now, which is too bad: more of those invitational or by slides, shows that would once in a while give you inklings of what's happening in America. They've just disappeared.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Big national shows.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes, right! At the Corcoran, the biennial, and every year at the Whitney, and that type of that thing that just isn't done any more. And when it is done, many of the things are selected by reputation period, and other inclusions once in a while by just judging by slides. And yet transportation has become easier than back then and you would think that museum curators and directors would circulate a little more.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Yeah. You know, that flagged in my mind an absolutely sideline issue, but how did you ship a four by eight egg tempera painting to Chicago, in the forties?

MARGARET TOMKINS: You crate it. And you had a truck to pick it up and go back by train.

BRUCE GUENTHER: So it would go train?

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yeah, and eventually get back there.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Because this, of course, is the age of specialized art handlers and you fly them on airplanes.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yeah! You'd just make a crate. And either take it yourself or you'd probably have somebody pick it up, you know, and get it down, and then if you're rejected, you had to prove that you were paying for it all the way back. (chuckles)

BRUCE GUENTHER: Artists always get those kind of privileges; it seems inherent in the system.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yeah. But at least one had more of an opportunity to get nationally shown then, I think, than now. They kind of pick from gallery artists, so that the unknown is a little more difficult to find.

BRUCE GUENTHER: That's right. The unknown or the artists who are without a gallery affiliation, it becomes much more difficult.

MARGARET TOMKINS: That's right. And I imagine that the Museum of Modern Art thing is more or less within that premise. The 165, a lot of those names are pretty familiar.

BRUCE GUENTHER: That's true.

MARGARET TOMKINS: They probably discovered a few, we hope.
BRUCE GUENTHER: (chuckles) We can always hope that they have.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Well that about covers my life.

BRUCE GUENTHER: In all the news clippings, you're talked about-- and I think it's true-- as the leading Northwest woman painter.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Is that supposed to be a compliment?

BRUCE GUENTHER: I think it's a compliment. I think it's...

MARGARET TOMKINS: Well, you've already qualified it.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Well, there are two women who, who turned up in...

MARGARET TOMKINS: That'd be like being the leading Midwest one-armed _____.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Well, now, in a community where, in the forties and fifties women's names were very rare, and into the sixties. All through the sixties, your name and Hilda Morris, are the only ones that are in the literature.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yeah. Well, thanks. If that's the summation, then I've been denied my goal.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Well, no, I mean it's positive, Margaret; it's the kind of thing where in the reviews your work challenged them. And it was important...

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yeah, but you're...

BRUCE GUENTHER: ...and inspirational to other artists.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Who? Fellow women?

BRUCE GUENTHER: Well, I think to other artists, men and women both.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Well, in seeing...

BRUCE GUENTHER: That the work was looking at and challenging people. And in the forties and fifties, they would mention that you were a woman and a wife, even though they called you Miss Tomkins in all the news releases. (chuckles)

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes! Which could be typical of that.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Of the period.

MARGARET TOMKINS: Yes, right, yes. But I think, particularly in this limited area [Northwest region--Ed.], that the definition doesn't have to qualify by being a woman or not. It [the work--Ed.] kind of wears in the balance. What's happening over the years within a limited area of this.

BRUCE GUENTHER: No. Because today there're, what, three or four thousand artists living here.

MARGARET TOMKINS: You wouldn't agree they're artists, but there's three or four thousand living here.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Self-defined! (laughter)

MARGARET TOMKINS: [Maybe] it's like ten thousand in New York. Right?

BRUCE GUENTHER: It's true, yeah.

MARGARET TOMKINS: But I guess that's always true relative; there're probably a great many artists living here at any period, or in L.A., but it's the ones that kinda have something within themselves that came out through what they were doing, sculpture or painting, that have it.

BRUCE GUENTHER: Yeah, I suppose that's what I was really saying, and observing. That's what you were accomplishing. I don't know. It's not easy. Thinking again about this... In the seventies it was a difficult time, FitzGerald's death; were there artists you were close to then? Had you, Larry Beck, or...

MARGARET TOMKINS: No, not really.
BRUCE GUENTHER: Did you ever get involved with Artists Equity when it was working here, or any of those artists' groups?

MARGARET TOMKINS: I didn't know it was. No, I didn't associate with any around here. And I think some of them- like they've had a sculpture group, I think, haven't they sometime? But I think most of the time the artists are fairly independent of mass action. It's changed quite a bit in terms of the types of artists you get here, due to the funding apparatus. And the word's out, like in the Depression the bums that were on the road used to mark the houses and the places to drop off the freight cars and who to hit up, and I think Washington's on the map for that, because it has a good funding thing, so you have a number of importees that will be here as long as there's that type of situation going on. Quite a few coming because it's a fairly well-endowed state for the arts.

BRUCE GUENTHER: The Art in Public Places money is very good here, compared to many.

END OF INTERVIEW