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**Oral history interview with Leon Berkowitz,  
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# Transcript

## Interview

**LB:** Leon Berkowitz

**JH:** Julie Haifley

**LB:** We're talking about this painting next?

**JH:** Well, I was going to start back and say the last time I was here, we talked about your travels and your involvement with the workshop.

**LB:** Correct.

**JH:** Today we'd like to concentrate on your work. And in order to do that, maybe it would be a good idea if we went back to your early work, and if you could tell me what your early work was like, and perhaps refer to some specific examples. [They replay a portion of the earlier tape].

**LB:** First trip: 1954-1955. After the workshop.

**JH:** This was when you spent a year on Majorca?

**LB:** That's when I spent a year in Spain, a sabbatical year. . I think there is where I first really found myself.

**JH:** What had you been doing before that?

**LB:** Well, I was just a painter. But I had, you know, completed my education, and all of that. And after the War, I went to various countries where I was apparently a student. You know you have it in the history, Italy, you know, as well as various art kicks in Spain, mostly Arabic. But there in Spain, I discovered my own isolation. I was equipped with my formal education as an artist, by the university and other places -- Mexico City -- and college, and Art Students League in New York. But I could see that all of that was behind me. And I had these years in the Art Center's workshop, where I was in contact with the artists of Washington, but more importantly, with people like Morris Louis, and with de Kooning, and New York artists. So I'd absorbed a great deal. The great question in my mind was whether I had found my own voice. In Spain I came to realize that I had. [break in taping]... always in your mind. But you're an artist when, a somewhat different definition, than you recognize in the theories. [laughs] And it was there that the people I was with -- people like [Creeley], the poet, and others, you know I had respect for -- and I found them looking at me and asking me questions. And [both laugh] I had a lot of knowledge accumulated from poetry. Poetry was a rather important source for me. I suppose I always had a kind of romantic sense of life. That's a confession [both laugh] that I seldom make to myself. But I think there is a real, a very clear value in the poetic imagination; that it is in touch with those subconscious feelings, memories, thoughts that affect and influence and shape your work and also accounts for the work itself. But I don't think I could have taken those leaps which have no proof that I was doing. [both laugh] It seems at times that those particular leaps are supported later by proof. And this has happened, of course. Really. You seem to be recapitulating what other minds have thought. Fortunately they've put them in writing. So at the same time you see the mirror of yourself. And then you get a marvelous kind of confirmation.

**JH:** Was this happening in Spain?

**LB:** Well, I was talking of a fairly consistent pattern after the years when I - - it comes from, well, I mean, I suppose the supportive evidence for what my imagination found was in -- well, such diverse sources, you know. Literature, physics, anthropology. Form, for me, at that time in Spain, and this is an example of the in-spaces things got, I'm trying to think, you know; sometimes my memory really plays dirty tricks on me, something that is very very important to me, names, like that.

**JH:** What is the title of that painting?

**LB:** In-Spaces of Land, Sea and Sky. I did a series, in Spain, of those in-spaces. My thought was that the sources, I was very much concerned with source. I still am. I thought the source of an idea could be mythology. Look at mythology for the source of contemporary thought, that is, we had a history. Your personal history only parallels it. And of course, the influence of psychology, I did some work in psychology, in the Army I was a psychologist and, yes, I have the degree; I almost got into it; I almost wanted to take my graduate work in psychology after I came out.

**JH:** Were you doing clinical work?

**LB:** I was working with clinical people, I was working with psychologist and psychiatrists, as an artist.

**JH:** In a sort of art therapy?

**LB:** It was an art therapy program but it had a rather strange slant, because my captain was a psychiatrist. And he wanted me as an artist, wanted someone as an artist, it happened to be me that he picked, to work with psychologists in developing art as a projective technique. And of course I learned all sorts of things that I never knew before ...gestalt and Rohrschach and all these things that we talked about. But it was hand in glove with the attitudes of the Abstract Expressionists that came from Jung and Freud. You know, again, the work "source" comes into play. I fortunately cold-shouldered the surrealists. Because Surrealism seems to be a false mirror of this culture. I didn't believe that symbols reflected the inner experience. I got part of that from Rohrschach. What I learned from the Rohrschach was that it wasn't the symbols that people saw, it was the abstract qualities that they saw, that were diagnostic, you know, a couple of colors, a concern with edges or the hole, you know, these are abstract qualities. But anyway, all of these things supported the development of my own aesthetic. I really wanted to develop a reliable, reliable premises for myself for my development. That particular painting began while my career was more mature period as an artist. We were living on a hill over the Mediterranean. It was the house of the, it was rented to us, the only other occupant before us that it ever had been rented to was de Falla, the musician. It was owned by the Consul, the Italian consul in Spain and, you know, there are so many details in it which are rather charming but no necessary for this. I was trying to get away, both of us were trying to get away from people, really. So many people went there simply to, so-called artists, but they spent much of their time drinking in Palma and talking and nobody did any work. We had a little house in Canaba [sp] which was, oh, maybe a half-hour tramvia ride away from Palma. And people would, you know, poke their heads in all the time: you couldn't work. All these Americans, and Danes. So Arthur Okamura we had met there. Arthur Okamura was a prominent west coast artist. And he was fresh out of art school, were wandering in the , he hand another, a couple of other French artists, in the hinterland behind our house. We came on this villa which was surrounded by barbed wire. We walked through the barbed wire and it looked like a house Frank Lloyd Wright had designed. This was, it was really a paradise, an enormous garden, oh, it was marvelous; and that was the house we got. I was afraid of it, you know [laughing]. But Ida loved flowers, and I thought, "Oh, this would be great for her," and I could somehow adapt myself...

What I mostly wanted was just a huge barn! But that was a very important year, I think. Well, Arthur had a house nearby, and a couple of major poets, and there were just a group of about four or five of us, really marvelous. And we were sort of isolated from the rest of the Palma culture. And I was saying, the Consul's wife had left me a studio, it was the maid's room over the kitchen and it was about as big as a huge closet. And Arthur and I covered the walls with paper so we wouldn't dirty up the place; and we tried to paint in there and it was no good. So I got out on the hill. And I became a major painter. [both laugh] And I set my canvas up against a wall that must have been up there in the time of the Moors. And I was surrounded by just the sky, the sea below it, just endless space. And that's where I felt comfortable. And I've been living in that space ever since.

**JH:** The title, is it, "Inspaces" as one word?

**LB:** Yes. The Inspaces of Land, Sea and Sky came from, the notion came from the things I am telling in terms of source. But Gerard Manley Hopkins discusses star-centering in his, well, Introduction to his poetry, he writes of his method and ideas. This notion of star-centering was also inherent in the idea of source. But in star-centering, like in his poem on Mary, The Air We Breathe, the living nature emanates the spirit to the total universe. And there were other readings, from other people, that involved such thinking. This became my space. It still is my space. De Kooning said, you know, each of us -- we once had a conversation about the kind of space each of us feels. And, you know, his space is different from my space. His space is close to his body, and where is it? And mine is "out there." But you don't know these things, they have to develop in the work. And when the work tells you these things. And I have -- one of the reasons I was writing -- you know, I don't write long things, but -- to trace the development of my thinking. Because the thinking is the result of the work. Just as the truth is told in a dream. [laughs] But conscious statement of what we call the dream is unreliable. So I've tried to find what was, you know, behind what I thought, and what is behind what I see, and what is behind anything. I went to my studio -- it was a dead bird, underneath it. The bird had died in the winter [I was painting in the winter]. I let the bird become the painting. That was the source. The bird became a source later, I painted another painting, recently -- the one when Golda Meier died, and at extremes of both paintings there were dominant golds with yellow. You see, it tells me things.

**JH:** Could you elaborate a little bit on how the bird became the painting?

**LB:** Well, this might be interesting to a psychologist [laughing]. I don't -- I trust my intuition. I don't think before I act. Only when I deal with the Internal Revenue! [both laugh]

**JH:** You acquired that already in Spain, or is that something that developed out of that period?

**LB:** Oh, well, it started in Spain. I don't know, I could talk about these things bird or Golda Meier just struck me right now painting. And they both dealt with that, you know? I am not a formally religious person. I'm very much against dogma of any kind. So how am I to know, if I reject dogma, what I really believe? [both laugh] That's where I come. But then, you see, if I were to form conclusions from my experience, then those conclusions would be benefiting of course. Well, what it meant means to me at the moment is that, "God, it isn't empty." And beyond that I can thank the development. But I'm so glad it's golden. I don't know why I'm glad, but I am.

**JH:** Close enough.

**LB:** One time in which we were traveling in the West, sitting on a train, and some woman sat next to me. We got in a conversation -- it was a long trip. At the time I had one of my catalogues and I showed her the catalogue. She looked at paintings in the catalogue and she said, "Tell me, is there

reincarnation?" I said, "Well, how do I know?" But she thought that I knew. And she almost broke in tears because I wouldn't tell her. And Ida was nudging me, saying, "Tell her, tell her." I said, "I can't, you know? So that is the nature of truth. What is truth cannot be put into words. You know. It's part of the reason why I don't have edges. It's part reason why I mistrust definition. It's part reason why I think there can't be a common humanity because we have barriers -- all kinds. But I think up to that level of knowing, there is a common humanity, you see, but you can't express it in words. You know, I've been trying to go back to that painting; and I've mentioned Hopkins, Gereard Manley who was in my thoughts then -- you know, all of the themes -- where reality existed; and I knew it wasn't what I saw. I stood on the hillside and I looked out across the valley where sheep were grazing. I couldn't see the sheep but I could hear the bells. And I concentrated on a clump of grass underneath the invisible sheep. And that is where I began -- on what that clump of grass contained. It was the seed of what I was endeavoring to say. And what it became, eventually, in that period, was a painting called The Feather of Night -- that is, it was a painting that began there but included the universe. What, I mean -- you can see how I'm opening up the space almost in a sense from the darkness. That, and then -- you know, rising upward, you see? So that I'm going down into the world beyond, and the world beyond is coming into the scene. Or -- that concept changes. Now, the concept remains; the form of the concept changed over the years. And it still exists in all my work: the source, its emergence, and the return of space I always look at nature to find that quality. And it exists in a shell -- you know, the beaches that the shell makes at each period of development -- they're like seas which have an edge. And then another sea, and another sea, until it folds around itself and it ends where it begins. there's always that quality -- you know, I can point out to you in so many ways that there's a certain unity. Oh God, I could draw on so long, you know but they all seem to come to the same conclusion. Some of these researches were -- if you could call them researches -- researches or realizations -- entered into the area of what is color. Back in that period, my wife showed the paintings to James Johnson Sweeney, who was at the Guggenheim. And he wrote me three letters and I never answered any of them. In one, he wanted to come to Washington and I wouldn't let him. Of course I was stupid. Because he said I was involved with light, and I thought he was a damn fool, I wasn't, as I thought. I don't know ...

**JH:** Even then?

**LB:** No, I didn't know it, didn't know it. You see, this is the kind of knowledge I trust, the kind which thrusts itself upon you, beaks through your consciousness until you believe that inner sense. Now I believe it, you know, I'm a dummy, it takes a long time. But if it's so difficult for you to see yourself, you have to work so hard at it. What about the rest of the world? They have a harder time. But there, of course, is the whole history in the development of my sense of what color is. And, well, I think you hear some pretty fanciful notions about it. There are many. Of course, color doesn't exist. You know? It doesn't. Because if weren't for the light out there, what is our color? So what we see is a relationship between a cosmic existence and our self. This sounds awfully spiritual, doesn't it? And that's what I've been accused of, of being spiritual, and animistic, and all this kind of nonsense. But that isn't true. I think that most of the world is mystic and I'm a realist. You see, I guess the artist has to be defiant a little.

**JH:** Yes. Did you continue this exploration in Wales?

**LB:** Well, yes. Because, well, during that next 10-year period, we spent about half of it in Europe. And again in Wales, there was a 2-1/2 year period altogether; there was a two year, and a thing in 1967 of six months. The dates are there somewhere. But I came back to America and then returned, you know. We had this thought that we were going to live there finally. And we bought this house thinking we could rent it. We had one fiasco when we were away for a year and, no, it was that 2-1/2 year period. It was rented for a year, then it was empty for 1-1/2 years. And we didn't

know what was going on. We came back and the front door was open. And the police said, Well, ... worried! Nothing was taken. But you can imagine the kind of imagination you've got to draw on, I tried to call people in America to check the house. Well, we were hoping, in those days, the 60s, it wasn't simple renting a big house like this. So we've ended up of course, living in it. But, so that was a back and forth thing too. In Wales, and that, incidentally, [break in taping] In these Spanish paintings I was of course influenced by the mood of Spain, which is dark. And I was very restrained in my use of color. I remember painting one that I called Gray Green I Want You Green, that's from Lorca's poem and I refused to put green in my painting, but I'm told the painting took prizes here. And then I resolved to have some green. But I had to justify it in terms of that inner experience The green, you know, I just let color out gradually. By the time I got to Wales, this is a Welsh painting, Wales is there in temperature. It's another world compared to Spain. There is a kind of efflorescence in the light, like it were actually rainbows. And it's partly because, I believe, it's because of the water vapors in the air which splits the light. And the St. David's Cathedral is surrounded by rainbows all the time. I, you know, when I came back to America after that, I wondered, "Is this my imagination or was it real?" When I returned, the very first thing I wanted to find out was, "Is it true?" You see, I wasn't believing in myself. I checked this later on in that same years, and Vermeer saw the same way. And I took a magnifying glass and I studied the edge so his figures where they existed in light, and he had broken the edges... But this was not true of de Hooch or any other artist of the period. Well, you know, I felt this was true before I found out, I almost cried. But certain artists, for them color has been a language. Turner, for example. And, you can almost read that language. What is the title of the painting? This is ... Is there a title on the back of that? Not at all? [male voice in background says "It says "Untitled: on the back"] Incidentally, what is that title of the Welsh painting here? I remember there was a, oh, I know now. It's called The Scent of Gorse. There was an old lady, almost 80 years old, or 80, I don't know, used to come -- we were living at the top of a cliff, and to get there was quite a job. It was so high, we used to look down on the road. And she'd come up there with a cane to watch me paint. She was the one who interceded with the people of the Cathedral, the Dean, to show my work. That was the show I had there in the Bishop's Palace, which was a kind of 14th century ruin, you know. But, and the people came, thousands, from the whole countryside, from the towns around. The BBC camera. They wanted to know what these Americans were doing up there for two years. But that, she named that painting. She walked away, and came back and said, "Oh, I know what it is. It's the Scent of gorse."

But you see that quality as compared to the particular gray and dark black . But each culture seems to have its own quality of light and dark. Greece: in Greece, there was always blueness. It was a place where philosophers could think with clarity. The earth is hard, and the sky is clear. And Jerusalem is beyond me. It was too mysterious. There was a violet in the air -- I couldn't catch it. There was nothing I did in -- I was there just a few months, but nothing I did there was satisfactory to me. That sense of the miraculous is certainly true. And also, of course, there is the drama of the tragic, river city -- Jerusalem was split in two. Right through the middle of the street there was barbed wire on each side. And the Jordanian soldires were facing the Israeli cultures at the distance of one street. And you'd walk between. And if you went too far -- my wife almost got shot because she went over into Jordan, she took the wrong path or road, and there were facing her with guns. We lived right at the edge, in an old Arab relic of a place. There was a courtyard beneath a stable of horses, and there was not heat, and no toilet, nothing. I used to sleep on a stone windowledge about that wide. But the experience was important to me. That quality of the violet later came back into the work, in America. You know, these things have been supported by other places that I've been in and other kinds of -- I started to tell you downstairs about that dream and when I painted the first in the Cathedral. I went to sleep that night and woke up -- well, I had a dream that I was holding -- see, the shape of the canvas was like this, and the edges were green, like light shining through, and within it is a kind of quality of luminescent violet. And I dreamt that I was holding a

goblet of sacramental wine to the light, and I saw the green edge of the glass, and I knew it was sacramental wine -- I smelled the red wine, in the dream. So I woke up, and I was still smelling the red wine. And I've had dreams like that, you know, which, so that I felt that what I was doing was supported some place deep in my experience. I came to trust this, more and more. And there has been a quality, I think, of an involvement with -- oh, I don't know what to call it -- something sacred, I think. And I've endeavored to be in touch with it, whatever it is. But somehow within that experience, is that much an advantage. And I did that series -- first, The Dualities. Always I was endeavoring to find and bring everything together. Like, in this one, that force of movement which is endeavoring to move itself -- you see, you don't know these things until later. Look: it's completed there. But the turning of these two forces -- these turning down, these turning up -- there's always that interplay, you know, a reciprocal movement. And I got it from the sea because Nature's always seemed to me -- and there is no horizon, really; it's like a twisting rope, you know -- really twisting the sea and the sky together.

**JH:** You really get that sense.

**LB:** Yes, yes, -- this is the way you find things really are. There is no line there, you know. It's the movement of the earth and the movement of the sky what we call the sky. And so, always that sense of continuum, impression. I used to listen to Eastern music a lot when I was working, because that has the same quality, you know? It deals with a kind of continual sense of time -- not like our time. We chop up time into pieces. I do too, you know. This is when I came back to America, and it was around '64.

when I was drawing these experiences of Nature, and starting to the "Harpstrings" things. Harpstrings, yes. There, sound was important. I got the plucking of those string vibrations as they move back and forth.

**JH:** Does this one have a particular title?

**LB:** It's called, Red Harpstrings, I think. Ida had wrote three poems about them. My problem in America, then -- I had a hard time for a few years, incidentally, because I wasn't in Nature. I was trying to find that meeting between what I experienced in Nature and the city -- bricks and -- you know, it was hard. And that's why I began to go toward -- well, toward clean shapes. But I still had to liberate those shapes break that chain, so the edges, of course, are soft, you know, and they're a continuation, and there's the vibration back and forth, you know. There's like the sea again -- the incoming-tide-returning thing, again. So those forces still existed. And I finally resolved these things. and I tended to do really tall things. There was somehow a compromise between the hardness of the city and the freedom of the Nature thing. That you'd held in your memory. Carried with me. And well, it wasn't until 1970 -- we were in New York -- I had gotten a grant, a national Foundation for the Arts things -- and we'd come up to New York, in '70,'71, and worked in SoHo. And that was the time of the year when I won that show, you know, it was not long after that; at the Stachlert[sp] Museum.

**JH:** Oh did you?

**LB:** Yes. I was going to put tape down to introduce that linear thing. And she said, "Golly, it looks good without it, you know?" So, I said, "I don't know how to complete it," you know. So, anyway, I let it go for couple of days. And then I realized I had to solve it. And then I did. I worked on the idea of surrendering -- I finally surrendered the last line. And then I found that what I had to do was organize energy, light energy. And then I went to the unity, which was a kind of a resolution of the organized energy. I had a show -- that was the Corcoran show -- and I wondered, "Gee, what

comes beyond this?" you know, once you've reached total unity, where do you go next?

[BREAK IN TAPING]

(voices over lap for first few seconds) I was using a single enveloping space. I was contenting a single enveloping space, see. I was considering such problems as the proportion of the little width to the height, I was trying to qualities like verticality in relation to my body and what the meaning of verticality-horizontally was, I mean in terms of proportion and, say, size. I was dealing with the field. But -- there were a lot of problems that I had to work out. But having resolved those, I my canvas, and somehow I felt that I had to enter, and in entering the canvas, discovered within the canvas what it contained. And sometimes it seemed almost as though I was looking at something in the distance as being in a woods, in a green woods, and seeing an illumination beyond. I began to deal, more and more, with different degrees of visibility, and contending with the notion of the threshold of perception. So that subtlety, and the almost visible, sometimes was in contrast to the clearly visible. So that there was a range in the visually perceptive qualities of the work. I'm still in that, you know. That is still an involvement of mine -- the discovery of what it presents. So that I'm still in the notion of source. But it seems as though there are levels, spatial levels of existence, and I think it becomes relatively clear in, let's say, that painting, which has been called Coronation. So I think that what I want to do is to be able to establish levels of light. But of course, in making a painting, the depth, all depths, have to return to the surface. Otherwise I would simply violate the notion of unity, which of course I was involved with -- just as again, I go back to that notion of the shell, or any cosmic phenomenon. And -- this is the way Nature is, this is the way -- I'm, I mean, I'm very close to that notion about our lives, but I'm afraid of it: I don't want to form an conclusions. But it's quite interesting. you know, you can find reference here and there -- you find it in Shakespeare, you know. The circular shape of our lives. So that's what I'm about, now. And to find light within light, or to find darkness within light; and light within darkness. You know, you look at various paintings, they take on these different qualities, these different searches. And I'm much more sure of myself as a painter of light no matter what. And color tends to have a different meaning for me. You know, I've always had a feather near me in my studio for years and years and years, form way back in Spain, way out in . Somehow I felt that in that feather there was some secret. And when I had difficulty, I would look at the feather and find energy.

**JH:** You said that to me, last time.

**LB:** Did I? Yes. But there's a certain mystique in that feather. You know, it could be something else, but to me it was the feather -- the relationships to the sea, to the sky, to everything. But it was in a sense Nature translating matter to spirit. Because the feather is formed by the air through which the bird flies. It's shaped by the air, and it emanates from its stem into the thinnest of the edge. And its color begins from within itself; it is not cosmetic. I'm very much opposed to anything which doesn't originate from within itself.

**JH:** Would you say that was the difference in your work and, say, the Washington color painters?

**LB:** Yes, very much so. I'm NOT a Washington color painter.

**JH:** I know, I know that you're not!

**LB:** That is such a confusing idea.

**JH:** Yes.



**LB:** I mean, it's as though I learned my lesson in a certain school -- the color school. But I didn't.

**JH:** No. And theirs are applied, more or less.

**LB:** Say -- in that article that David Shaft wrote, I think that he makes that fairly clear. You know, I don't have any of these characteristics of the Washington color school, if it does exist. I admit it does exist. But I'm twice removed from it. but my ideas are so divergent, totally, from what those ideas are. I don't have shape. I don't have the typical, you know, ways of organizing the colors as the color school uses. But I have form. It's a dynamic form, you know. That whole notion of that I orchestrate the light within a painting so that it changes with the change of light of the day, is the idea of the continuousness of space and light and form -- it's a time involvement. And it doesn't exist in any of the so-called color school people. I want to make my painting as close to the condition of life that I can. And so I deal not with any kind of fixed aesthetic. I'm constantly looking for the principles by which Nature makes its form. And Nature makes form to exist in time, and the form is always changing, it isn't a fixed -- there is no fixed reality. So this is my response to those relationships and to my work. It seems as though there is no end, there's no end; you know? It's simply that our insights become divers, and that we seem to ask and demand more of ourselves. It now takes me longer to paint now than it ever used to take me. I can't turn them out, you know in quick order. Because each thing is a very deep commitment, and it's a means of further knowing what we're discussing; a further realization. So I suppose that's all I can say at the moment. I'm sure I could say more but ...

**JH:** The viewer's experience of your painting, then, is bound to be far different than, say, your own.

**LB:** A lot of my confirmation comes from the response of the viewer. Not in the things that people say, because as I said people have difficulty forming conclusions in looking at the work, because always seems to evade them. But that's my purpose.

**JH:** Yes.

**LB:** But what I do get is this -- whop, somatic responses. I've actually made one guy run out of the house -- he couldn't take it. He's a rather famous guy, too. But he -- well, he thinks the world of the work but he just couldn't take it. And other people have cried, you know. More recently there was an artist here who works in New York now, and this woman actually came to tears and she said she had the same response only to one other painting in Paris on her recent trip. And that was Coronation of the Virgin by somebody. And that's why it's called, Coronation.

**JH:** Oh!

**LB:** You see, the names of my paintings sometimes do just incorporate response of other people, when they're real. Or the guy -- English philosopher -- who was here a couple of months ago. He asked to meditate. And he stayed on the floor meditating for 2-1/2 hours, in front of one of the paintings. You see, this is the kind of ...

**JH:** Which one is that?

**LB:** Oh, that was Tree of Life. I think I showed it to you last time. So, he remained in that womb position or whatever it is for 2-1/2 hours. I couldn't work in my studio. Fortunately, he came very early in the morning! So you see, this is the kind of response which for me is conclusive. Of course, I have the other sort of things that people write, you know, but ...

**JH:** In that Corcoran exhibition that was subtitled The Sound of Light ...

**LB:** Yes.

**JH:** ... the notion of the light being audible to the viewer: is that one of your making, or is that something the curator of the show dreamed up?

**LB:** Well, that was one that I, I really admit I tried to resist.

**JH:** It didn't sound like you.

**LB:** It was not my idea. But I won't go into that.

**JH:** All right.

**LB:** But here is some justification for it.

**JH:** It doesn't seem consistent with your own thought on your work at all.

**LB:** Very perceptive, what you say. I would much prefer But here was, well, in ancient Indian art here is that idea -- that originally we had sound and that, well, light came from sound. I know that one of the interesting things in my mind was that -- what was his name, the architect -- Louis Kahn. In designing a building, he would begin with silence and sound. His chief preoccupation in any piece of architecture was light, and he said it always began with silent and sound in his imagination. So that a -- that -- I always forge the name of it, begins with K -- but he used long barrel vaults, you know, he had that long sounding thing. So that the enclosure of the architecture really is an encapsulation of the light. And of course these are things which are very much in my thought -- the notion that a painting encapsulates the light, or like in Vermeer, in his painting of The Pearl, the pearl which is in effect some of the light. It's simply that I am dealing with the architecture of the rectangle and its flat surface, and somehow I have to make that a common existence between this spheric form of vision and the architecture of the canvas. So there is some justification for The Sound of Light. But I would prefer to call the exhibition Ten Years of Work or whatever.

**JH:** Yes.

**LB:** I'm very cagey about titles. I need titles, because that's to recognize my own work -- you can't keep on saying, like -- I did develop more than 50 Unities. I can't tell them apart, because they're Unity No. 1, Unity No. 2 -- where do you get it? But there are enough breakups in the period, you know. But when I say Hommage to Gold, I know what I'm talking about, you know. Or if I say Coronation I know what I'm talking about. Now remember, you know, these paintings go places I may never see them again.

**JH:** And there's the Big Bend series.

**LB:** There's the Big Bend well, the Big Bend series came out of the experience of Big Bend in Texas. And another thing came out of that: the dark-light paintings for which I've done few. But I think I may go back to at one point. Because when you deal with light, you're also concerned with darkness. And there -- do you know Big Bend at all? Ever hear of it?

**JH:** Yes.

**LB:** Well, it has the appearance of the way the world might have looked on the day of creation. So, what a place to read the Cabala, and I had a book on the Cabala. I'd read the Cabala but enough of it for it to take place in my head. And one of the notions is the notion of the origin of life concept of

life emanating from that darkness. The Cabala itself is referred to as, oh, black fire on light fire. And there are other things about the Cabala which are magnificent. I think it's an ultimate statement of human faith. But there I had the sense of looking into some of these darkneses and the feeling that out of that containment there was this source from which I wanted to derive, you know, I felt a mystery, you know. But it was to find, hoping a reality. It was a felt thing. I hated the dark places. But here I'm concerned with light, but you know fascinated by death. So I wanted to bring light out of darkness and I didn't know how to do it. I did about three paintings which are in that series -- I call them the ES Series. The high meaning. They're like two letters. I know what they mean.

**JH:** They're what?

**LB:** ES, for eye and soul. They're two different letters, eye and soul. But people seeing ES One and ES Two they don't know what it means. That's what I mean by hiding, you know -- hiding my meaning. Or when I did the AM One which is -- did I show you AM One?

**JH:** I don't think so.

**LB:** That's a triptych.

**JH:** No, I didn't see that.

**LB:** Mike, why don't you show her AM One

Mike: This one?

**LB:** AM One. AM we will think of as meaning, like, one o'clock in the morning right? Or it could be the first day, or it could be analyzed in any one of those ways. What it means is, after Monet it was the first painting I did.

**JH:** After what?

**LB:** After seeing Monet.

**JH:** Oh.

**LB:** I saw the Monet show in New York.

**JH:** I see.

**LB:** And then I came back with that, you know, deep feeling about his colors and his light.

**JH:** I wondered if there were other artists besides Vermeer who'd had an influence on your art.

**LB:** Well, of course China and Chinese painting had a great influence, early on. Lu Chee was one of the classical Chinese. It's *ti k'wei* and is actually a kind of model for the kind of space that I came to realize. For years I would go back to it. Like I've been back to the feather and try to see why I was so fascinated by it, you know? We're dumb! It takes us so long to realize what we can believe and what we think. You have to go back to things again and again and again. And as you develop, you know, then you come to that moment where you're level with death, experience. That's as it was with Vermeer. I never understood Vermeer. Everybody said, "He's great." I said, "Sure, he's great." But -- you know -- I didn't know about the notion of the pearl light for many years, until I came on the notion myself. And then I wanted to check and sure enough, he had it. So I think you grow in

your experience to the point where you can recognize that other people have grown to that point.

**JH:** Were there any of your contemporaries who had any influence ...

**LB:** Oh, Louis was an important person to me. There is nothing of Louis left in me now that I can recognize. Louis once looked in on me, came to my studio. He poked his head in the door, and said, "I know what you're interested in. Fragility with strength." And he chuckled. I wanted to rediscover form but I wanted to discover it out of the of Nature. And then, to realize, form that discovery of form, how Nature makes its forms. So, when you talk about form, and the thing is like time. "Hey, look." Now, you see, there's time isn't it?

**JH:** Yes.

**LB:** That measured change. The pace of the light. three becoming one, you see.

**JH:** Yes.

**LB:** Whenever there's an episode, that episode changes in a kind of constant way. It's like variations . But it holds a single experience. I wonder if she ever saw that other triptych?

**JH:** That big one?? That one?? I doubt it.

**LB:** Show it to her. I'd like her to see it now, because -- since I'm talking about time.

**JH:** When you told me earlier that we could talk for half an hour without revealing your technique Would you want to comment at all about how you work, you ...

**LB:** I can't, I told you upon records, you know, for now. So that's the record.

**JH:** This shows up on the video tape, right?

**LB:** Well, it's watching me paint a painting. And I talk sometimes. I don't like to talk technique, because I don't think that's the purpose of the artist. I think each person should find his own. I've actually talked with a couple of people but they're not artists, you know, they just -- I mean, I don't want to be know as the guy who uses a particular technique; I mean that's not the point Besides that, I want to then it become s part of a mystique, you know -- you're exposed to the experience. I think it's pointless to talk about technique. What I can, of course, say is that I use oil paint, and with a brush, and that I don't spray, and I work with multiple layers of very thin oil pigment. And that I may use as many as 30 or 40 pigments, and each one is complete because there are no edges, you see it. And I have to dry each one thoroughly before I lay the other. And they are my materials, and I use hordes of turpentine. I make my dealer rich, buying turp! You ought to see that, it's an interesting painting. That's very recent, you know. There are some of these paintings which I haven't wanted to let out. I'm having a show at the museum of South Carolina or somewhere, the museum of the University of South Carolina. But I'm not sending the new works. I'm not going to let them see it.

**JH:** What are you going to do?

**LB:** Waiting for when and where I want to show it. I mean, the newest a good show down there, but there are other things which are developing. A traveling show was a possibility and it would come back to Washington. And then I am dealing with a new gallery that's almost finished, it will be finished in two or three months. So I'm still saving mine. But this is something that's There isn't too much shift in light but there's ...

**JH:** there certainly is.

**LB:** But you can imagine what goes on as evening begins to come on. And then every becomes so, so ... The colors darken. There's constant change going on. This one -- I was listening to a Verdi opera, I don't remember which. And in depth -- in search of depth of light in a human voice, you know. And yet its soaring quality. And so it combines, in Verdi, you know, both the tragic with the exaltation. That can only take place in a very broad high state. And it can't happen in a thimble. But people ask me, why did I paint so big.

**JH:** Does this triptych have a name related to the Vergi ...

**LB:** I don't know, I might, I might. I hate to say Homage to Verdi. Somehow, you know, the word will come which both reveals that height. But people have to find their own meaning, oh Lord. I don't want to give them too much of a clue. It's there; if they have any feeling, it's there. You see, the emergence of that form within ...

**JH:** Yes.

**LB:** ... almost lost in the first

**JH:** Yes.

**LB:**

**JH:** And it was more apparent when you changed the light.

**LB:** Yes, of course, of course. that's that losing and bonding thing -- you know, I referred to that earlier -- about the threshold of our visual perception. So it's to go a little bit beyond and then discover. But there are unites in it that help to ... Of course So, what a leap, over those years, from Spain! That's what I was searching for.

**JH:** It makes me wonder, like, where can you go from here?

**LB:** I've been saying that for years! It used to scare the daylights out of me, but I'm not scared anymore. I'm not scared any more. Oh, a few years ago when the National collection of Fine Arts wanted to see my Cathedral, I said, "Gee, I can't believe that, you've changed." She said, "Oh no," she said, "these are marvelous," she said. "Just do these." It was enough, for her. But then, you see, you can't.

**JH:** Yes.

**LB:** Because if this is an avenue for, you know, realization, for knowing, then the avenue continues, it goes on. And great art, like, well, Matisse, whom I admire -- Matisse, I mean, in comparison to Picasso, I would say he was more of an influence. Picasso I can't stand. I can't stand him because he is in prison. You know -- black lines around everything?

**JH:** Yes.

**LB:** And he seems to cut his forms with an axe.

**JH:**

**LB:** My God, yes.

**JH:** Fantastic.

**LB:** Well, you see, this is what I mean, that you, what you -- you can't hold anything tight, you know, to be in contact with it. You can't.

**JH:** I don't remember where this story does come from, but how difficult it is to drink water with a clenched fist ... to be able to catch the steam and drink if your fists are closed.

**LB:** Yes. You know, we look at the moon and we say, well, you know, it looks like cheese, or like somebody's face, or something. And, you know, people have believed that. But it's much more believable that when you hold your hands like that in the moonlight, if you lift some water from a lake and hold your hand, the moon is resting in the palms of your hand. Just as much of a reality. And so when we say, well, this is real and that is real, and that is real -- they're all real. But because they exist within us, and not because they're made out of anything we call hard, cold facts. There are no hard, cold facts. And there are no bottom lines. These things I can't tolerate. But . And I think these are strong realities. Not complete realities; very pertinent, strong realities.

**JH:** In your psychology studies, did you get into the Jungian idea of the collective unconscious?

**LB:** Oh, of course. Oh, I don't know, I haven't pursued it. What I have pursued is my experience. And I always regard things like that as parallels to my experience. So they're what I call confirmations, or they're support. They're "Eureka!" experiences, you know. When somebody else like -- somebody that you really love and respect has formed your idea to -- Einstein has been someone that I constantly admired. For him, a truth had to be beautiful to be true. It wasn't enough-- you know, he couldn't trust it enough. Because he had that kind of sense of life that it was whole. To say that life is whole is something beyond truth, believe. but without that belief, he couldn't have perceived his theories. so it puts him on a level above the engineer-scientist, you know? The whole history of science is a very romantic history, really. It's very unscientific. But -- yeah, the painting is for me a kind of responsive surface -- you know, responsive surface; not just for me but for others. It's, you know, it exists because of my own sensibilities, all my senses, and my perceptions. I used to feel that the surface of a painting is like the surface of my skin. Because things that give life to my skin is the river of blood under it, the life under it. And it's true. So that the surface of a painting is something which has that quality of tactility that a living person has. These are the kinds of things that I endeavor to incorporate into the kind of work I want to do. And it's that -- you know, it has that quality. It's very tactile. You don't touch it -- with your hands.

**JH:** But you can wallow in it with your eyes.

**LB:** You can! The Pool. I want you to see The Pool.

**JH:** I'm going to turn the recorder off for that. Now this is called Pond?

**LB:** No, this is The Pool. I've made a pool before. The pool refers to the experience of looking down -- you know, you're drawn toward it...

**JH:** You noticed it the first time I got up.

**LB:** ... and experience of looking deep in the pond, as you look in the water. And just as I -- but then, the vertical style integrates well, even though it's just a of a pool. It's a continuation of But has to do with the notion of duality, which I've used before. And in a way it's constant reference back to the function.

**JH:** Some of your earlier things were almost mirrors.

**LB:** Yeah. Well, these are mirrors, too. But by making them in a sense separate experiences, and bringing two separate experiences into one experience, it has a kind of psychological tension you wouldn't get by making them alike. I did want to alike ...

**JH:** Do you think you'll be the same person after today as you were yesterday?

**LB:** I'm sure not.

**JH:** If not, she knows it's not the ..

**LB:** Well, let's not show her the next step.

**JH:** No, another one.

**LB:** Because it's yet.

**JH:** Is there anything else that you'd like to add here? We're just about -- oh, we have probably about five minutes.

**LB:** Oh really?

**JH:** Yes.

**LB:** Well ... Maybe what I could do, if we have five minutes Well, I'll read one of my lists. This is from a recent note: "Planes and straight lines do not exist. Physics can denote the continuum. It cannot invent it. The high-frequency sound has always been there. The tonality is only pattern discovered in principle. The universe only alters itself in our minds. Creativity is a tuning into the universe and not to alter men's minds." I ask you if you've altered your mind, I hope. I'm to alter human minds, as a life ambition. "A cat can experience gravity. It cannot express from that experience an objective or subjective pattern. The mind, the human mind, is a laboratory in which the experienced universe is shaped and projected. Great art always intimates its sources." That's one note. I've put in here things like, "That painting within the red" -- I called it, it's now Coronation, I should include in your tape its title -- the Within the Red refers to the fact that the whole painting is contained within the redness. And it does deal with the levels which I was referring to before -- the levels of , as though each life is a curtain, and you enter into the experience by going through those curtains. But then we all have to snap back to the surface, whether it's red . I was working from different sources. My surfaces are centers from which I work -- from which the painting will grow ... I was working from different sources -- I mean, say, in different relation to earlier work. Now the sources are at different spatial levels. Instead of, let's say, that concept of proceeding through the forest to the source of life -- that is, discovering within that life light -- let's say, the point of its origin ... Anyway, the descending arc passed over the upward, rising arch you know, I have reference to the incoming tide and withdrawing tide vertical but it comes from that, from the whole scene in nature -- the red central source spreads over the blue source beyond and above. Do you see? So that the beyond, and the above, become another form of duality. This is down, and at -- I mean the pool. You see, I have now had more and more situations to work with.

**JH:** And instead of less and less.

**LB:** And instead of a lot more. You see I trust ... They come to me, and -- because I've used my perceptions. Because that's all we have. You know, I used to believe that, well, we were given, by

Nature, all of the ability to meet and understand our experience. And that, somehow or another, we have no reason to feel deprived, you know? I think that there is an anxiety in man to withhold this capacity. That's why -- you know, this whole notion of repression -- why do I have to stay within these limits? I have a little note there of a photographer who is almost blind. So that within a very small range of his threshold of visual perception, he does masterful work.

[END OF INTERVIEW]