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Oral history interview with Nicholas Carone,
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Transcript

Interview

PC: PAUL CUMMINGS

NC: NICOLAS CARONE

PC: May 11. Paul Cummings and Nicolas Carone. Do you accept the "e"?

NC: Well, in Italian it's Car.ro'ne. We were called Ca.ron' all through school.

PC: You were born in New York. I don't have a date for it.

NC: June 4, 1917, in New York City.

PC: Why don't you just give me some idea of your family, you background, where you lived in New York.

NC: Well, my family is Italian. My father comes from Bari, Italy. My mother comes from Lucania. They came here, oh, I don't remember the date when they came. I was born on the East Side of New York. When I was about five years old, we moved to Hoboken, New Jersey, to live. I was really brought up in Hoboken. I went to school there, public school. And then I started to go to art school from there when I was very young, about eleven years old. I went to the Leonardo da Vinci Art School.

PC: Oh, downtown.

NC: Downtown. It was in an old church in St. Marks Place.

PC: Right.

NC: And Noguchi was there, and Peter Agostini and George Spaventa, and Marca Relli. But I was younger than they were.

PC: From Hoboken you went back and forth?

NC: Yes. I used to travel as a kid. I used to go to night school there at eleven years old.

PC: That's wild. How did that start so early?

NC: Well, it was Italian, you see. It had a sort of Renaissance policy. And my mother always talked about Italian art and Raphael and Michelangelo. They didn't know of any other schools and it was just a natural place for them to send me.

PC: You must have spoken Italian at home. Did you?

NC: No, I didn't. I never spoke Italian at home. They spoke Italian but they spoke a dialect. It's just as well that I never learned it because it would be a handicap. I learned to speak Italian in Italy when I went there about seventeen years ago.

PC: That's funny! All that -- nothing in the middle.

NC: Nothing in the middle, no.

PC: That's interesting. Did you have any brothers or sisters?

NC: Yes, I have two brothers and three sisters. I have a brother who's a painter now. He's down in Florida and has his own gallery. He exhibits as a painter.

PC: What's his name?

NC: Matthew Carone. He was here last week. My other brother is an engineer. My sister, Janice, is a concert pianist. We're all musically inclined and studied music.

PC: Did you study music?

NC: Yes, I studied violin. I played the violin for eight years.

PC: That's great. So, let's see. Hoboken, and school here. When did you start going to the National Academy? When you were . . . ?

NC: About fourteen. I was there on and off really until I spent two consecutive years working with Leon Kroll a little later. And I was also going to the Art Students League. I had a scholarship with Arthur Lee who was a sculptor. I used to go there at night.

PC: Who did you study with at the Academy?

NC: Leon Kroll mostly. I studied with Olinsky for one winter and Charles C. Curran; do you remember him? And Leon Kroll. Mostly Leon Kroll because he was more liberal and modern. He had a very broad point of view. He was a big influence in my life, by the way.

PC: Oh, really?

NC: He was like a godfather.

PC: How so?

NC: And I worked with him as his assistant on a mural. He had a mural to do in Worcester, Massachusetts.

PC: Where was that? I read there was a mural, but I . . .

NC: Yes, the Worcester Memorial Auditorium. It was a mural dedicated to the Unknown Soldier of the war of 1917 and they finally got around to doing it before the Second World War. In fact, the war broke out while we were working on that mural. So I was there with him, living up in Worcester for about three and a half years. And that was a good experience. I was nineteen. And actual work, you know, a big surface.

PC: That must have been quite something. How large a mural is that?

NC: The mural was 31 feet high and 57 feet long. It was one solid plane. One piece of canvas woven specially for it. There are three panels. There's a large main wall and two side panels, and they were the same height and about 15 feet wide on either side of the auditorium.

PC: That's fantastic. That must have been in the late thirties?

NC: Yes. That was about 1939 to 1942, I think.

PC: Well, that wasn't involved with the Federal Art Project or any of those things? It was a separate commission?

NC: No, No. It was a separate commission, yes.

PC: That's interesting. Who did you work with at the Art Students League?

NC: I worked with Arthur Lee. And then I worked with Corbino for a couple of months while I was there. Also, I used to pose there as a model to hear what other instructors had to say.

PC: Well, that's one way of getting right into things.

NC: Yes. Standing on a model stand, you know, and then listening to all the criticism. I worked in classes with Kuniyoshi, Rico Lebrun, William Zorach, Mahonri Young, Stuart Curry, Isabel Bishop.

PC: Well, that must have given you quite a different view of these people, listening to their

NC: Personal contact, really. Lebrun impressed me very much as a teacher when I was working there.

PC: But you never had a desire to study with any of these?

NC: I had a desire to study with Lebrun but he left at that time and went to California. I went to see him out there one time. I took a trip to California and stayed there for about a month and I saw a lot of him there. And I was to work with him on a mural that he was doing, in San Francisco I think. Then the war broke out and I had to come back and decide whether I was going to enlist or wait to be drafted. So I enlisted.

PC: Well, let's talk a little about some of the earlier things. I didn't know that you went to the da Vinci School so

early. Your family obviously was very liberal in letting you take your own head and go where you wanted to go.

NC: That's right. I talked my mother into letting me quit high school because I felt that I really wanted to be an artist and why waste all this time at public schools when I could get an education in the meantime in a practical sense, you know.

PC: When did you leave high school?

NC: I was about fourteen, or fourteen and a half.

PC: And you became a full time art student?

NC: Then I became a full time art student, morning, afternoon and night.

PC: Terrific! How long did you live in Jersey?

NC: Well, my family is still there. Practically all my life. Of course I went into the Army -- I forget -- in 1941 or 1942 and I was in the Army for three and a half years. And before going into the Army I got the Prix de Rome Of course I couldn't go to Europe because the war had broken out.

PC: Well, this is interesting. You have, you say, a brother who is a painter.

NC: My brother became a painter very late, I mean a few years ago, really.

PC: What happened before that then?

NC: Before that he was living in Florida teaching public school. He was also a violinist and was playing with the Philharmonic there. And he used to write me letters with drawings. He wanted criticism of the drawings he was doing. Judging from what I saw, I felt there was a psychological disturbance there, you know. I said to come up to New York and stay with me on your vacation. And he came one holiday and spent two weeks with me in the studio while I was preparing my last show. He'd just sit around the studio and watch me paint and I'd talk to him about drawing and painting and so on. Then I set him up in the studio to draw for two weeks, putting him through a sort of analysis of form through the Cubist concept. And he worked two weeks with me. And then he went back to Florida and the next year he had his first exhibition -- like that. And has been showing down there since. He's won prizes in regional shows.

PC: It's interesting that there's this terrific kind of art-oriented life that you grew up with. Are you still very involved with your family.

NC: Yes, I still am. It's a wonderful family. It's a great family, really. Our house was like a salon in Hoboken. All the musicians, writers and artists always used to come to our house. It was wonderful. It really was.

PC: Through your mother's interests?

NC: My mother's interests. She just loved that kind of climate.

PC: Great, great.

NC: She cooked for them all. It was open house every night.

PC: You must have had the opportunity to meet people in all kinds of different art situations.

NC: Yes. Mostly people involved in the arts whether they were poets or painters. A lot of people that I knew from New York used to come over and visit.

PC: How about your father? What did he think of all this?

NC: My father was a stevedore. Had no sense of what was going on.

PC: All these people were just sort of a passing parade.

NC: Yes. But he enjoyed the fact that there was that climate. He loved the people around. He didn't understand it. He was sympathetic to a degree but my mother was the one who was feeding off it.

PC: All the children picked it up.

NC: It's a very close family. I mean we all love each other and see each other constantly. Even now I can go home and see my brothers and sisters all at my mother's dinner table.

PC: That's great. Well, did you have a lot of books around? And things?

NC: Yes, sure.

PC: Oh, you read a lot?

NC: Yes. Well, our friends were literary people. When we were young, we were introduced to the right kind of literature, you know, through discussions. Some of them were teachers.

PC: What kinds of things did you have to read?

NC: Dostoevski. I remember that was a very important period in my life.

PC: When was that? When you were a teenager?

NC: About sixteen. I began to feel like one of the characters. I looked like one.

PC: Really? Which one?

NC: Oh, any Dostoevski character you can mention. Then there were friends of my mother's, Italians who had studied art or who worked here and studied themselves. One very close friend of my mother's was an art student; he was probably in his twenties at the time. He was studying at Cooper Union. He wanted to be a painter. He used to come and give me lessons, sort of, you know.

PC: Who is that?

NC: His name is Clemente. He never amounted to anything. He was just a friend of the family's.

PC: That's kind of marvelous. So you really had a nice, warm situation where all your interests were going on there.

NC: Marvelous. It really was marvelous.

PC: Well, you said you started drawing quite early. When was this?

NC: At four.

PC: Really?

NC: Yes.

PC: And what kind of things do you remember?

NC: Oh, yes, I do, very clearly. In fact, I was talking about that just last week with my mother. I said I couldn't remember where we lived. We lived on a certain street there. At the time my father had a business of ice and coal. He had a horse and wagon and there was a stable next to the house. And I used to draw the horses on the street with chalk, actually looking at the horse and drawing it from life. At four and five years old.

PC: That's terrific. So you had life class very early.

NC: Life class. It was a love of horses.

PC: That's great. Do you remember any of the other kinds of sounds or visual things that went on around? Were there lots of children in the neighborhood that you played with?

NC: Yes, it was a

PC: Was it an Italian neighborhood?

NC: No, it was a sort of mixture, strangely enough. There were Irish, a lot of Germans, and Italians in that particular neighborhood.

PC: Lots of children?

NC: A lot of children, yes. Oh, we played a lot.

PC: All the games?

NC: All the games.

PC: Were you ever interested in sports?

NC: Yes. I was a very good track man. I ran with the Holy Name, or was it the Holy Cross -- I forget the church -- in the Hoboken games at Stephens Institute of Technology. I was supposed to run with the Wanamaker group here in New York, the Wanamaker Mile -- you've heard of that -- but to become a member of that team I would have to work for Wanamaker's, and I didn't want to do that. But they had me pace an Olympic champion up there and I did very well. I think I could have been an Olympic champion in track.

PC: If you really went at it.

NC: Yes. I had a fantastic confidence in running, you know. And I did run. I was first all the time in relays and short distance running. Also, I swim very well. I was very interested in diving at one time. Can't do it now. But I do swim a lot. I played baseball, handball.

PC: Do you still play handball?

NC: Not any more. I hurt my arm. I can't do that any more. I have what they call a tennis elbow. And I can't do any of those sports now. I used to go to gymnasium a lot. I like to box. I had a relative who was a professional and I used to box with him. I used to train with him while he was training other people for professional careers. [INTERRUPTION FOR PHONE CALL]

PC: Phones go all the time.

NC: Yes.

PC: You said you went to a public school.

NC: Well, high school for two years. The Demarest High School in Hoboken.

PC: You didn't have any art teachers there? Was there anything outstanding about that?

NC: No. They knew I was a talented student and they'd ask me to do little drawing projects for the classes. And that's about it.

PC: But you were going to the da Vinci School?

NC: I was going to the da Vinci School. They were very concerned about me because I was going to the da Vinci School at night and when I was in class in public school I'd be drawing by memory the things I did at night there. And a lot of them were nudes, you know, like Venus and so on. And they were concerned about that. I was reported one time for being caught doing nudes. I was brought down to the principal. They thought maybe there was something strange about this boy who was doing nude figures.

PC: What did you do at da Vinci? Was that plaster casts? Or figures.

NC: Yes. That was about the works. Well, I'll show you: I have some here. You started off drawing from reproductions like, say, photographs of antiques. Just so that you understood the medium. If you were working in pencil, you couldn't smudge it. You had to use the point so that you'd get an even tone just by little swirls, pencil swirls. It was technical, in a way. And after that you worked from the casts. And after that you went into the life class. That was typical of all art schools at the time. The academy was the same thing. They'd start you with the cast and then the life class. You'd draw from the model. And then you'd go into the painting class. And that's it.

PC: Terrific. Let's see, both your parents were Italian.

NC: Yes.

PC: I just want to cover some more of the background things. Did you have any kind of religious education?

NC: Well, it was Catholic, you know, when young. I had my Holy Communion. I was never confirmed.

PC: Oh, really? How did you escape that?

NC: Well, I was about fourteen then. That's when I started to go to New York to art schools and I sort of drifted away from religion.

PC: All kinds of other activities. Do you have any interest in it still?

NC: Yes, I do. Very much so. I mean I'm very interested in the New Testament and its meaning from an esoteric point of view, understanding, say, the levels of meaning of the parables. I've gone into various studies of

religions. I went to the Dante Center. And later on I became interested in Gurdjieff and Ouspensky. do you know them at all?

PC: Yes.

NC: I also joined the foundation. I was working with them for a couple of years.

PC: Which one?

NC: The Gurdjieff. I'm very interested in that.

PC: They're involved with the theosophical . . . ?

NC: It's involved with all esoteric knowledge really. It's really in essence a sort of esoteric Christianity. But that's a very deep subject and it relates to many things about art, too, to me. And what schools are. And what a school should be. And disciplines. And self-knowledge, working on one's self. And the reference towards the work itself. And the plane as a symbol of consciousness and stuff like that. You know, it's involved. If I have to talk about my aesthetic philosophy, it would have its roots in this knowledge, you see.

PC: That's interesting. We'll get into that a little bit later.

NC: Yes. That will be a difficult subject. I mean, it's going to be very difficult to verbalize it. But that has something to do with how I come off as a teacher also. I've taught in various places.

PC: You've taught quite a bit over the years?

NC: Well, I never wanted to. I really don't like to teach. But they say I'm a good teacher. I'm always invited to teach. I always do. I've never asked for a job in my life. I refuse them all the time.

PC:

NC: It's just that the kind of teaching I'm involved with is creative and it's a giving of yourself and you can deplete yourself. When you come back to your studio you find that you have nothing to say. You've said it. Meeting 30 kids as individuals and trying to reach them personally, you have to dig out a lot.

PC: Yes.

NC: And nothing comes back to nourish you so that you can fulfill yourself again. You have to get it through another experience, through impressions in the life experience, living, to feed you again. Otherwise you feel like an empty shell when the students get through with you. I find teaching very taxing.

PC: Not really rewarding in any way?

NC: It is rewarding, yes, when you meet some student that is sensitive and there is a right kind of dialogue going on. He can give you a lot just from what he's asking.

PC: But there are not many of those?

NC: There are not many of those, no.

PC: That's interesting. What do you think led you to do drawings and then go into . . . ? Did you ever have an interest in any other kind of career?

NC: Never! Never! Never!

PC: That was the first . . . ?

NC: I wasn't prepared for anything. I started to draw, as I said, very young and never stopped. And I drew very well. I'll show you some drawings I have here when I was in Leonardo da Vinci Art School. Professional drawings.

PC: That's fantastic!

NC: I never did children's drawings, as we know them. I've always done drawings that were related to art. I mean I was a sort of natural Renaissance artist when I was a kid.

PC: Did you have art books at home or things with illustrations?

NC: Well, there were books. There weren't too many of them. You know, there was always something related to

Michelangelo or Leonardo. That was a household word. And friends brought books to us

PC: Reproductions?

NC: Reproductions. And this friend of my mother's would take me to the museums when he would go on a Sunday. He would take me to the Metropolitan quite often. The Frick Collection. And there was always that sort of reference to Italian art, you know. They'd say, "Well, when you go to Italy when you grow up." "When you see Leonard." "When you see Michelangelo. Ah!" That sort of thing. There was always this awe.

PC:

NC: Yes. There was this sense of wonder about something to experience on a very high level. That was always there as a very young boy.

PC: Well, you were You grew up identifying with all these

NC: That's right. But then the thing that amazes me is that the natural talent was in that vein. I would draw that way.

PC: That's terrific. How did you get involved with Leon Kroll? Because you said that you . . . ?

NC: Because of the National Academy. He was a teacher there and I was sort of one of the prize students, so to speak. His favorite, you know. And I was young and was athletic and I used to model for him. He used me as a model. He recognized the talent. He became like a father to me. I practically lived with them up in Worcester. And that was a nice environment for a young painter.

PC: In Worcester?

NC: Well, I mean, like at dinner, for instance. Friends like Henry Taylor would be there. And visiting artists that he knew. You know, he's very famous to everybody. He has a strong position in the official art world.

PC: Well, that must have been really kind of exciting, being . . . you know . . . because you were, what, nineteen?

NC: Nineteen, yes.

PC: And being involved with a very famous painter, and a man who, you know, was doing this tremendous commission.

NC: That's right.

PC: And then all these people going in and out.

NC: That's right.

PC: Where did you live then, if you were up there for all those years working on the mural?

NC: Well, I lived in a boarding house near the auditorium, just a few blocks away. But I saw them a lot. I was always there for lunch and dinners. And we'd work a lot. He had a very strict schedule. I was up there at eight o'clock in the morning through six every day. And I used to go to the Museum to school. They had a class in drawing. I used to go there at night to draw. After working with Leon Kroll, I'd go to this class at the Worcester Museum.

PC: What kind of work did you actually do on the mural?

NC: Well, we scaled it up from his sketches. I did all the drawing, laid it in in flat colors. And the drapery, I did all the drapery. I'm very good at that. He would never let me touch the heads or the hands, the flesh tones. That was something very personal. But the trees, the grass, things like that.

PC: So there's a lot of you in the mural? **NC:** Oh, yes. And then he kind of put his handwriting over it, you know. After it was laid out, then he would come along and unify it, so to speak. **PC:** That was a terrific education.

PC: Well, it was really frightening in the beginning. I was awed by the space. It was unbelievable. When you're up on that scaffold -- the scaffold covered the whole panel, by the way -- and one man could move that scaffolding, just push it away from the wall. And when you're up there close to the wall, it looked like it was here and the expanse went around you. And that whiteness. It was a gessoed canvas. He wanted to get a fresco effect. We painted that mural with thin brushes. Skies, clouds, leaves, trunks of trees, drapery.

PC: It was a whole education in itself.

NC: In a way, yes.

PC: Up to a point.

NC: . . . anything. do you know what I mean?

PC: Is there anything else about that mural that you think was interesting at all? Or have we pretty well finished that topic at this point?

NC: That's about it, yes.

PC: It was lots of work.

NC: A lot of work. A lot of changes made, you know. A figure would be put up to a certain size and then you'd look at it from down below and you'd find out it had to be done differently to register the plane.

PC: You wouldn't have much time to do anything or yourself?

NC: No, no. The only thing I did for myself was draw from the model at the Museum School, or the class they had in the evening there. That was it.

PC: So that brought you Well, the war started by this time.

NC: Then I enlisted in the Army.

PC: What was that like? What did you do in the Army? **NC:** I was very fortunate. I enlisted in the Air Force, the First Fighter Command, and I was stationed here in New York city for a while. I was living at the Hotel McAlpine. From there we went to Mitchell Field, Long Island, and I was there most of the time. I was in the drafting section. My officer in charge was Gordon Bunshaft.

PC: Oh, really.

NC: Yes. At the time we were doing work with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. Or they had these contracts with the Army and we used to render some of the drawings, architectural drawings of map tables and things like that, radar maps. That was about the kind of work we did.

PC: Did you get to Europe? Or were you here all the time?

NC: No, I stayed here all the time. From Mitchell Field, I went to Washington for a short time and then back to Suffolk Air Base on Long Island.

PC: Well, did you have a chance to do anything else?

NC: Well, while I was in the Army, that's when I decided to work with Hans Hofmann. So I used to hitchhike in from Long Island to New York and go to Hofmann's class at night, while I was in the Army, then hitchhike back.

PC: Where was the School then?

NC: The New York one?

PC: Yes.

NC: It was on Eighth Street, where that movie house is, above that movie house.

PC: Right. The studio was there?

NC: He was there a long time. That was a good experience. It was a great experience to work with Hofmann.

PC: How long did you work with him?

NC: Well, while I was in the Army I used to go to him in the evenings and then on my furloughs. I had a furlough and went up to Provincetown and spent time with him there.

PC: What kind of classes did he have then? Were there many students during the war?

NC: Yes, in the evening classes in New York he had quite a few students, mostly women. There weren't any men

around. Most of them were in the Army and when I went up to Provincetown on that furlough -- I only stayed about two weeks, I think -- they only had about five students.

PC: Did any of those students in your groups become painters?

NC: I don't remember. Yes, Jean Follet -- do you know her?

PC: Yes.

NC: She was in my group. Larry Rivers. Jane Freilicher. Nell Blaine. Perle Fine was there before me. Robert de Niro was there before me. Of course, a lot of them went to his class on the GI Bill after they got discharged. That's when I went to Europe. So I didn't see the later boys.

PC: How were the classes with him? I've heard so many different descriptions of how he worked and how things happened. I just wondered what your feelings were about that.

NC: He worked from still life. We always worked from nature. No matter how abstracted the drawing became, it came from nature. And I believe in that, by the way. From that experience, which is a real experience, a real plastic experience. He'd set up still lifes. There'd be mornings when you'd work from the still lifes and in the afternoon he'd have a model to work from.

PC: What kind of criticism did he give? Do you remember?

NC: His criticisms were based on understanding the nature of the plane, the picture plane, organizing the plane in a plastic way; very strong emphasis on structure through movements. There was an analytical approach in the Cubist sense. Then, if you could go beyond that, you went into a more synthetic realm, into a more abstract thing until you came to a very pure plastic approach to the work -- very much like a Mondrian. And I think if you arrived at that with a plastic experience, I think you were just ready to leave him, that's all, because he couldn't take you anywhere else.

PC: Right. Then you were on your own.

NC: Well, that's what I did. I brought it to that pure state and then from that I went directly to the figure again in the realistic sense. More like an Ingres. More like this.

PC: Yes. Ingres!

NC: That's what I did. Which was for me a great experience, you see, in the school.

PC: That's interesting; doing one and then

NC: I started with the figure and he insisted that I was too involved with it to break away from it, to get more to plastic essentials. And I had a difficult time with him. The first six months I didn't understand what he was talking about and was very psychologically disturbed by the fact that I didn't understand what he was trying to get at.

PC: Well, that was your real first direction towards abstraction, though, wasn't it?

NC: Absolutely. Yes.

PC: So it must have been very difficult.

NC: Very difficult.

PC: You'd been working for

NC: I was very dissatisfied with what I was doing before because I was looking for something more real. It wasn't so much the figurative aspect of it, it was the underlying abstract structure that I knew was in art but I didn't know how to get at it. And through Hofmann I think I did.

PC: It's amazing! He really had an incredible influence on people.

NC: I can't tell you what a great teacher he was. He was a great teacher!

PC: I've talked with people who've done all kinds of things. He could get right at it in enormous variety for everybody.

NC: A big range of understanding of art on every level. A marvelous teacher.

PC: Absolutely incredible.

NC: A funny thing, I didn't like his work myself. I didn't like his painting.

PC: But he could bring fine things and pen doors for people.

NC: Yes.

PC: What do you think about the fact that you didn't like his paintings? That you did like his teaching? Did that bother you at any point?

NC: No, it didn't affect me: the fact that he painted the way he did or that I didn't respond to his painting I knew that whatever he had to offer would help me develop my style.

PC: He wasn't really totally abstract by that time, was he?

NC: well, you see, he varied. Many people don't seem to understand this -- that Hofmann developed from his students. And a lot of talented people went to him and, if they involved themselves, he was aware of their researches and experiences in areas that were opened up in the class. I think that the most advanced -- and you can quote me now, boy -- the most advanced art was done in Hofmann's class. When I first saw, let's say, de Kooning, I didn't think he was so advanced. In fact, de Kooning later on began to do what we were doing in the Hofmann School.

PC: Really?

NC: Yes. When you take the very broad paintings of de Kooning's late period, you know, the big massive movements, those were things we were doing in class way before he ever came to it.

PC: His abstractions?

PC: Yes.

PC: Not non-figurative. I mean still

NC: Not a pure abstract artist. For example, Franz Kline -- the things that Franz was doing, we were doing that in school. I mean a few of us were doing it. I'm talking about the talented people that were going beyond what was acceptable in the art world. And Hofmann knew it. Hofmann used to say that. He'd say, "You people don't realize what you're doing." He said, "You're doing something more advanced than anything outside." And it was true as I see it.

PC: Well, how did that come about? Do you think through his capability? The opening up . . . ?

NC: Opening up to you and you'd dare go beyond yourself and not be kept back by a climate of acceptance of this is like the end in art today.

PC: He always kept saying, "Go ahead! Go ahead! Go Ahead!"

NC: Just go on and on and on. And then, through this experience, you're going into very deep areas, you see.

PC: That's terrific! what about his theories? Did he really try to implant them? Or was he so flexible that . . . ?

NC: He was very flexible. What was basic with him was, first of all, a plastic organization and how to get at . . . you know, see nature in plastic terms: being very space conscious. It was like a new language for us. It was never given anywhere in American art. That language came out of Paris. But it had a lot to do with the individual working in the class and how far he would go with the medium, you see.

PC: It's interesting. It really seems that you could do almost anything you wanted. There was no regime set, in a sense.

NC: No. A lot of people just stayed with a very limited part of the teaching, just to its narrow limits really. But if you were a more talented person who had some other experience to back you and were looking outside For instance, I also used to see a lot of Surrealists around the Iolas Gallery. Iolas was a friend of mine. And I heard a lot about Breton and Matta. I heard a lot about Gorky and so on When I was in school a lot of the kids didn't know anything about Surrealism, for instance. Surrealism was almost a taboo subject.

PC: Well, they were here then weren't they, some of the Surrealists?

NC: They were here around that time, yes. In the early 40's, I think.

PC: Did you get to meet any of them?

NC: Well, I knew Duchamp. I knew Tchelitchew and the Neo-Romanticists. I knew Eugene Berman at the time. I don't remember now. It was more or less a climate, you know, that you were around. Because the abstract painters were just coming into the art world. I mean, Pollock had his first show, I think, in 1942, or was it later? I don't remember the date. But a little later.

PC: It was around that time, yes.

NC: Do you remember Peggy Guggenheim's Gallery? Well, there was a Surrealist climate at her gallery.

PC: Yes. Did you go there, to that gallery?

NC: Oh yes. Sure. I had a strange kind of social relation with Surrealism. Then from Leon Kroll which takes in the whole middle-of-the-road academic school from Woodstock to Rockport. Right? And then my personal association with Iolas which was a very Surrealist Neo-Romantic world. And then the Hofmann thing, which was a more abstract expressionist point of view. So that takes in a big field of experience.

PC: You met Iolas very early?

NC: Very early. I knew Iolas when he opened the Hugo Gallery. I was there at the opening of his gallery. In fact, he was going to take me on under contract because I was doing a kind of Renaissance Neo-Romantic drawing. And he could use it at the time.

PC: That's fascinating.

NC: See what happened to Iolas.

PC: Yes.

NC: But I may have a show with him with my sculpture when I go to Italy. He has a gallery in Rome.

PC: Terrific. What happened after you came out of the Army? That must have been around 1945.

NC: Yes. I married. That's important.

PC: When did that . . . ?

NC: I married. It was my first marriage. My wife was a stewardess. I met her through my sister when they were nurses together. And, of course, I was seeing a lot of her before going into the Army. When I came out of the Army I married her and we went to Italy right after this, you know

PC: Well, you had the Prix de Rome, didn't you?

NC: Yes, but that was during the war, you see, and I couldn't use it. So they gave me a cash award at the time instead and I kept the money. It wasn't very much. It was about \$1,500, I think, or \$1,000. I put that away so that when I came out, if I came out, then I would use it to go to Italy. And I did. I went to Italy after the war.

PC: Well, you had a Fulbright?

NC: I got that while I was in Italy.

PC: So you got then while

NC: Yes, while I was in Italy.

PC: Obviously it had been a desire of yours to go to Italy.

NC: Oh, yes. That was very important. I had to go. I was looking forward to that practically all my life.

PC: How was that? Right after the war it must have been rather bleak, wasn't it?

NC: Strangely enough, it wasn't. It was really the most wonderful time of my life. A lot of Americans were there. That's where I met Matta, in Rome. And that was a very important relationship.

PC: You spent four years there, right?

NC: Not quite, no. About three-and-a-half.

PC: Did you travel much in Italy?

NC: What I did is I bought a contracted studio and I put money into it, fixed it up and made a lovely studio out of it. Lived there and spent very little rent. What do they call that: You buy the block to rent . . . contract or something.

PC: Like a lease?

NC: Yes. That's right. I paid about a thousand dollars for the lease, you see. And the rent was, oh, ten dollars a month. And it was right on via Margutta. Do you know Rome at all?

PC: No.

NC: And it was right next door to Fazzini. Do you know Fazzini.

PC: No. I know the name.

NC: He's a very I think he's one of the best sculptors in Italy. He's very well known there. There are just three sculptors there -- Marini, Manzu, and Fazzini. Fazzini really is the best, you see. And I was right next door to him. It was very much like this street, by the way.

PC: Oh, really? With all . . . ?

NC: Exactly like this, but only this in a courtyard. I had a studio just like this. Next door is Rothko. Strangely enough, I met Rothko there when he came to Rome with his wife and now he's living right next door. And then there's a sculpture center here and Robert Cook, a friend of mine who I know in Rome, also exhibits here. It's a strange place.

PC: It's very funny, the whole

NC: It's like a transplant of a Roman Street on 69th Street.

PC: What did you do in Rome then?

NC: Well, that's when I worked very seriously. I worked very hard. I did most of my work then; what I would say is the most creative work.

PC: You had your first one-man show in Rome?

NC: Yes. I had my first show there in a gallery called the Cortilla Gallery which is no longer in existence. And I was sort of sponsored by the Italian artists there. Like Renato Guttuso, he's very well known. And Afro, and Mirko, and Capogrossi, and so on. They sponsored the show. And Guttuso wrote the preface for the catalogue. And that was a good experience to be in that climate, you know, that aesthetic climate, working with the Italian painters.

PC: How were you accepted there as an American painter?

NC: Well, they found me . . . they thought of me as an American, not as an Italian. This is very interesting. At that time I was doing very abstract expressionist work after Hofmann, you see. It was the first time I went off and started to paint. They didn't understand it. But they thought, well, this is the new art coming from the new country, America. They resented it. A lot of them resented it. They said, "Now what are you going to show us? We have such tradition and here you are doing things we don't understand. What's its motivation and so on?" Strangely enough, they slowly started looking. Because they knew that this was happening in the world and they had no access to it. And I was a direct access to it -- is that the way we say it?

PC: Yes, direct line.

NC: Direct line, because I was there doing it right after the war, just when it was happening here, too, you know. That was in -- what? -- 1947, I think, 1948. For instance, to give you an example, I was invited to Afro's house for Sunday afternoon tea to meet somebody's brother and other artists, because I was on the via Margutta. And they asked me about America. You know, what's going on? Who are the painters? And I mentioned Miro to them, for instance, who was very hot in New York. Miro and Klee. It was that period when everybody was sort of influenced by them. They didn't know who Miro was. Afro didn't know who Miro was.

PC: Fantastic. They didn't know about Miro?

NC: Never heard of him.

PC: It's amazing!

NC: And then, of course, Matta came to Rome. That was after that scandal in New York with Gorky. And Iolas was there that summer. He sent Matta to see me because Matta was in bad shape really, after that tragedy.

PC: What . . . ?

NC: Oh, don't you know about that? You see, Matta and Gorky had a very close relationship. And Matta got involved with Gorky's wife. Then of course you know about Gorky's suicide. A lot of people blamed Matta for it, and he was excommunicated from the Surrealist movement. He left New York, you see. And that's when I met him, during that period. He was in Rome for about a year. I used to see him every day. I used to let him use my studio. We worked together. And that was really one of the very important periods.

PC: This must have been like a whole new change for you, wasn't it?

NC: Yes, it was a kind of merging of things, you know.

PC: Because he's a tremendous personality.

NC: I would say one of the great influences in my life.

PC: I'm still curious about the kind of existence you had in Rome.

NC: Well, I lived not as an American; I lived with the Italians. I wasn't just a tourist. I set up a studio and lived there. I associated with most of the Italian artists. I knew them all: Afro and Mirko and Guttuso.

PC: Do you still see these people?

NC: Well, I saw Afro -- he 's in town. He had an exhibition at Viviano last week. There was a party for him which I went to. And I knew Alberto Burri before he really became a painter. I was the American that introduced him to American art. I used to give him my magazines -- Tiger's Eye, Art News.

PC: What did they think of those publications?

NC: They were eager; they were eating it up. They really were. They fed off it. They never saw an actual picture, you know. They never saw a picture in the flesh, so to speak, until that show in Venice when de Kooning and Pollock and Gorky were representing American painting. That's when they saw it for the first time.

PC: Wasn't there some kind of Neo-Romantic school of painting after the war, some kind of figurative thing?

NC: It was always figurative in a way. And the more daring people were looking at Braque and Picasso, but in the figurative sense. I never felt the Neo-romantic movement there. The real painting in Rome at that time was La Scuola de Tonale -- The Tonal School of Rome initiated by Morandi, you see.

PC: Yes. Well, he was a terrific influence wasn't he? Morandi?

NC: Yes.

PC: He was a big teacher and all of that.

NC: Yes. Those Italians all went through a phase where they were influenced by him. Of course he was in Bologna then. And then there was this Roman school with Maffei heading that sort of group. And all these other people were much younger. But then Matta became a big influence on them. They didn't take him seriously but they certainly were feeding off his vitality and his spirit and his ideas, you know. They were feeding off it. Afro definitely studied under him at that period. And Burri saw a lot of him. Matta, you know, is a very inventive man. And Capogrossi used to come to my studio. He didn't know what these things were, these abstractions. He said, "Show me, how do you find these forms. Where do you get them from?" I said, "Right from nature." And you know I actually had him sit beside me and draw with him. Then there was another man, Calli, who I used to see in New York before. And he's doing very well now in Italy. Corado Calli.

PC: Well, he's become a political power there in the art world.

NC: Yes.

PC: I have some friends who know him quite well.

NC: Yes, he's very shrewd.

PC: A big politician. That's very interesting. Calli was here during the war, wasn't he?

NC: Yes, he was.

PC: He was very unhappy with his experiences here, I gather.

NC: I think he became a citizen, too, but I think he gave it up when he went back.

PC: Yes. You didn't teach or anything in Rome? You just painted?

NC: No, I just worked. And I showed. I had a one-man exhibition. Then I started showing in group shows. At the Quadrenniale there, which they have. I showed at the Modern Museum there. I shared a room with Matta, canvases. Pictures going on exhibition, you know, traveling around. I traveled somewhat. I went to Florence and Venice and Milano. And I spent my summers down in Positano, Capri, Ischia. Went to France from there for about a month or so.

PC: You said there were many Americans there. Did you know who they were?

NC: Well, Scarpitta, for instance. Do you know Salvatore Scarpitta?

PC: Yes.

NC: He was there. Robert Cook. There were other Americans, not painters, like writers.

PC: Did you get involved with people other than painters?

NC: Yes, very much so. Particularly, there was a man named John Nay. He was a very dynamic person, brilliant and talented guy. I saw a lot of him. You'll be hearing from him. This is a heavyweight. He's not selling yet. He's playing a game with maintaining his own integrity, you know. He's a very shrewd guy. He's now in Switzerland.

PC: I don't know him.

NC: Nobody does. C: Not 'til he

NC: I knew people interested in films. I don't know anything that happened with them. Actors.

PC: You must have had a very busy social life too?

NC: Yes. There was a nice group. William Murray, I don't know if you know him; he's a writer. He was there.

PC: What decided you to come back? What brought you back?

NC: Well, after a period, I had trouble with my wife and there was a split in the relationship. Then I had accumulated a certain amount of work. My roots were really here, not there. Because what I was doing was an American idea. They weren't ready to accept that yet. They all made it afterwards. They all carried on with those seeds planted. And, as you know, Afro became a very successful painter here. But he's not successful there.

PC: Oh, really?

NC: I mean he's made his money here. He doesn't sell in Italy at all.

PC: Well, how was selling pictures in Italy after the war?

NC: It was very difficult. No one was selling there. There was no market for modern art, really. But now, of course, it's changed.

PC: So you came back to . . . ?

NC: I came here with the intention of showing for the first time with Iolas. Then Iolas was having a problem with his gallery. He was putting it off, putting it off. He didn't know whether he was going to keep the gallery. Until finally I think something happened. He got some kind of backing. But then I had to find a job. I went to the Stable Gallery and worked there.

PC: How long did you work with Eleanor?

NC: I worked with her about three-and-a-half years. I started from scratch in that gallery.

PC: That was when she was on . . . ?

NC: Down in the old stable on Seventh Avenue.

PC: Right. . . . corner.

NC: Yes.

PC: She had Noguchi then?

NC: She had no one. Noguchi came later. See, she was supposed to start working with Iolas. Iolas was going to supply her with artists. She had the gallery. She was getting the backing. And he was going to act as consultant to her since he was going to initiate, you know, introduce a lot of the young painters from Paris and also artists in New York. This was when the scene was just beginning, that Abstract Expressionist scene.

PC: It was even before Tenth Street, wasn't it?

NC: Oh, yes. Sure.

PC: Because Tenth Street really came about when

NC: Well, no. Wait a while. It was just around that time. In fact, the Tenth Street show was the year before Eleanor opened the gallery, I think. And then the next year she had the gallery and we took over that Annual, the Artists' Annual. Do you remember that?

PC: Right.

NC: I had all to do with that. She didn't have one artist to begin with.

PC: Why did she want to become a dealer?

NC: Well, she started off A friend of hers had that stable and was using it for making mannequins for department stores. I forget the girl's name. And one holiday season, around Christmas time, Eleanor said, "You know, I'd like to use this place for a little kind of boutique." And her friend said, "Go ahead, use that space." She did, for that Christmas holiday and did very well with it. It was very successful. Then her friend had to give up the stable. Her business failed and she was giving up the stable. And Eleanor said she'd like to take it over. She had a friend who had a lot of money who said, "I'll back you. What would you do with it?" Eleanor said, "I'd like to have a gallery here." And that's how this relationship with Iolas started. You see, she had to connect with somebody in the business and he saw the possibilities of it as an exhibiting location.

PC: Well, it was an interesting space.

NC: Oh, absolutely! And don't forget, this was the time when artists were starting to paint big pictures, and abstract painting was becoming something to look at. Pollock had already made his dent, you know, and de Kooning was hot on the scene. And it was like a whole new thing coming up. That's how that gallery started. But she didn't have any artists at all.

PC: That's interesting. So you worked for her for . . . ?

NC: About three-and-a-half years.

PC: What did you do?

NC: Well, I was sort of like her assistant director.

PC: And did all the work in the gallery?

NC: Yes. I started the gallery really. I got all the artists for her. I got the first show -- it was Edward Dugmore. I got Marca Relli. And after that, Ernie Briggs and John Ferren and Noguchi, Joseph Cornell, Robert Rauschenberg, Twombly, James Brooks, Jack Tworikov and his sister, Biella. Well, you name them. They all became well-known. Then I showed with her finally afterwards. Is this going to continue on, or do you think we ought to call it a day?

PC: Well, we could do a little more. Or . . . ?

PC: You don't keep records? No diaries? You don't have anything?

NC: No, No. PC; Do you have correspondence with artists ever or other people?

NC: With artists? No. Just with sort of official people who ask me to teach.

PC: But, you don't write to people? I mean the artists you met in Italy you don't write to?

NC: No.

PC: Do you see them when you go there?

NC: That's it. It's a constant. Certain people you meet are constants. Like with Matta I feel that I could see him anywhere in the world and it's going to be just the way we left the last time we saw each other.

PC: The time goes away.

NC: It may even be after a great interval, but that's

PC: Are there many painters or artists that you have close relationships to, like Matta?

NC: Matta was the most meaningful to me. You're speaking only of painters now?

PC: Well, writers or . . . ?

NC: The sculptor Fazzini, I am very close to him. Oh, I know a lot, Marca Relli is a very close friend of mine here. I met him in Italy also. And I used to see a lot of Burri when I was there.

PC: Then you see these people when you go back?

NC: Yes.

PC: Have you been to Italy many times since?

NC: No. In fact I went for the first time last summer; after that three-year stay. Plan to go now this summer.

PC: But you will stay, what, a year or so?

NC: I hope to. You see, I have these waxes that I want to cast. I want to take them and have them cast.

PC: Oh, right.

NC: I really would like to work there for a while.

PC: Because of the foundries and that sort of thing?

NC: Yes. It's more conducive to that kind of work. You can always get people to help you, too. They know how to make molds and casts and pick up your work easily. The quality is good. It's less expensive. And then I have friends there who are sculptors that make it all so easy.

PC: Yes. When did you start the sculpture?

NC: A couple of years ago. I was teaching one summer in Skowhegan. And I meet Calvin Albert there. You know Calvin Albert?

PC: Yes.

NC: I knew him in New York, not very well, you know; "hello", "goodbye", that sort of thing. And he was the sculptor instructor. Naturally being two New York people in the country, we would get together and discuss the art scene and so on, and talk about sculpture a bit. And he was very interested in my point of view about sculpture. Although I never had done it in my life, you know, yet I was always related to sculptors. When I got the scholarship at the League it was with Arthur Lee. He was a sculptor. And I used to go to his studio and draw from the model with him and talk about sculpture. And when I was in Italy I was always around Fazzini. He lived right next door to me, like in the next building. And I used to see him every day. But I would never touch sculpture. So he said, "You know, I'm very curious. I'd like to see what you'd do as a sculptor. You sound like a sculptor to me." So I said, "Well, I've hesitated all my life because I felt that I might get hooked and it's like two-timing painting."

PC: Yes, it's a big transition.

NC: Yes. Then he said, "Well, will you do me a favor? Suppose I set you up, send a student up to your studio and set you up. I'd like to see just what you'd do." So we did. And the first thing I did was a head in clay. And it was so natural for me, two hands working. So I showed him the work and he said he had expected something like that. Then the heads in plaster. And Staempfli saw them. And he said, "I'll give you a show next year." I said,

"I'm not a sculptor. I don't know the craft." I enjoyed doing it, but I didn't want to get involved with the technical aspect. I mean, to think of making molds and then foundries and bronze and the expense. And then coming on as a sculptor when I already had something going as a painter, you know. So that's where it is now, as you know. Where am I going to get them cast so I can show them?

PC: I think I asked you before if you worked with models? Do you?

NC: No.

PC: You just draw upon your drawing experience?

NC: My drawing experience. Knowledge of the figure.

PC: That's fascinating. So, really, you've been in the middle of a big transition for some time.

NC: Sure.

PC: Have you been painting too?

NC: Yes, I've been painting. Well, that's been interrupted. I was doing some figurative painting before going into sculpture. And that also is a transition from, say, the abstract shows, you know. But I've always been involved with the figure. All my life.

PC: Well, but it's been in the drawing all the time.

NC: Yes, sure. I've never shown them in drawings like that. I've never shown them, you know. But I always believe that from this I will go into what I believe the figure situation is. I still feel I have to paint a picture. I don't feel I'm painting pictures. Do you know what I mean?

PC: It's still developing.

NC: This is all like the homework for it, you know. It's like finding your cast in the situation, in the psychological image of the statement.

PC: That's fascinating. I think it's very interesting that the sculpture works so well. I mean from just seeing those for a little while they look like you have such ease with them.

NC: But I still feel, I mean I'm really ambitious about it, contrary to whatever you might hear about it. I'm very ambitious.

PC: Yes.

NC: I feel that I can do that figure that people are waiting for. I feel I can. And I think maybe in Italy I can do it. I want to make a figure. A new figure.

PC: And there you have all the materials.

NC: Yes. It's conducive to doing it there. It's hard here.

PC: Why is it hard? What's the problem?

NC: I don't know, I don't know. The climate isn't for it. The aesthetic climate doesn't feed you to nourish that idea. Do you understand?

PC: Yes. It's like a desert here.

NC: Yes, it's desert. And then there's all this political thing beating at you. Do you know what I mean?

PC: Yes. The art world

NC: The art world politics. Which I'm very aware of and stay away from now.

PC: Well, you must have been very involved with art world politics when you were at the Stable Gallery?

NC: Yes. It was very difficult for me as an artist to keep who I was separate from whatever that job called for me to do. It sounds like a dictating policy about trends being there -- "I'll show you, and not you." Do you know what I mean? And that affected me personally. And that's why I wouldn't show my work there. I kept that separate.

PC: I've always found that artists who work in galleries find it terribly difficult, because, you know

NC: It's terrible! It's awful! It's awful.

PC: You know, you had all the decisions and being involved with other people's work and not your own.

NC: Yes. And then imagine being put in a position where you're passing judgment on things, saying yes or no to something. Artists take that very personally.

PC: Of course. Because the work is a person. It's very hard. Well, are there any people who you feel were terrific influences, or who helped you a great deal in the sense of your development of your work?

NC: Not directly. Indirectly. I would say that the Hofmann School was a great experience for me, you see. I think I went very deep in research, let's say, to the nature of the plane. Which gave me, say, the language to work with. The other great influence was a person like Matta.

PC: Well, what kind of things other than the fact that you've mentioned of his terrific personality and his invention?

NC: The digging into the unconscious to find whatever there is there for you to use. Pollock was also a great influence. I mean he knew all about being in his environment rather than what he had to say, because he never said anything, you know. He was very interested in my work, by the way. Deeply interested in my work. But that's something that is, you know, it's taboo; you can't ask me to talk about that.

PC: Why?

NC: Well, because he said things to me that are very important to me about who I am. He knew who I was. And Matta also knows who I am. Duchamp, for instance, seeing a picture of mine that he thought was a very important picture, said, "Nobody will ever know this picture." That's all he said. Giacometti I was with Katharine Kuh last night, strangely enough. And I was in a show in Venice, I don't know when, an American exhibition in Venice. That was the year I think Giacometti got the prize. And he went around the galleries with Katharine Kuh to see the Americans. And he said to her, "Of all the Americans I've ever seen, Carone has the most to say." Like that's important to me. They were of these head that I was doing then. Matta was important to me because he introduced me to what Duchamp was. Do you follow? So it's very difficult to talk about. Because I was doing some abstract painting in Italy at the time. They were really a very broad, strange idea of space, for instance, sort of multiple space. It came from the outside, this shouldn't go to the corners, it came from a different way of coming in on it. And Matta used it. Matta painted a whole show from all the work in my studio. I let him use my studio.

PC: That's interesting.

NC: It sounds like you're blowing your trumpet; it sounds like ego blowing. So that's why I can't talk about these things, you see. If you take all my work in my studio, like this studio, take all the pictures out around him and paint in the middle of it.

PC: That's extraordinary!

NC: And if you look at Matta's 1950 works, they were really my pictures. He said, "I really don't know what I'm doing." And the scheme was there for him to use and then the imagery was his particular

PC: That's fascinating. Well, you must have been interested in color, because Hofmann was very interested in color.

NC: Yes, but he never taught painting really.

PC: Really?

NC: No. No one ever painted at Hofmann's, really. Drawing. Drawing. Drawing.

PC: Drawing, yes.

NC: They got confused when he talked painting. He wasn't sure of it himself.

PC: But were you using, you know, brighter colors than people were using there, as opposed to the more . . . ?

NC: No. In Hofmann's class when I painted, I painted with bright colors. But then I reduced it. I went almost black and white because the drawing idea was so far beyond the color knowledge. I don't know what to say

about it. I felt I had to paint with that idea in mind. I reduced it.

PC: But you must have had a little brighter palette when you were in Italy than the other painters around you?

NC: No.

PC: Not really?

NC: Not really, no.

PC: Because I've noticed that American pictures seem to be brighter and higher-keyed things than many of the European paintings.

NC: They are now. They weren't then. You see, for instance, if you see Gorky in Italy he looks dead.

PC: Oh, really?

NC: There's a thing You see, living and working with the Italians, there's something about their aesthetic that sort of seeps in, you know. For instance, the Italians speak about tone. They don't paint pure color. It's a tonal idea. But that tonal idea also has a metaphysical meaning. It has a time sense. It's like pushing; it's pushing forward in time. And they become very acute at what is true and what is false; what is deaf and what isn't deaf, you see. And I remember going through galleries in Venice with Morandi, and Severini, and Fazzini, and Fontana, just going through. And they looked at I think it was Severini and Morandi, they were looking at Gorky. And they said, "Un poco sordo" -- "sordo" is the word -- "a little deaf." The tone wasn't pure. It didn't ring. Do you see what I mean?

PC: Oh, I see. In musical kind of terms.

NC: Yes, in the musical sense. They saw de Kooning for the first time. That was the big Excavation picture. And they said it was forced. And they said "It's strange about these Americans," -- Morandi said this -- "They dive into the water before they learn to swim." That's what Morandi said about the Americans while he was looking at the Excavation picture. The thing they responded to truly was Pollock. It was the first time they saw Pollock. This was new. So you understand how they come to it, with what critical standards they come to a thing for the first time. But there is a tradition behind it that gears them for that.

PC: That's fascinating. Well, let's sort of bring you up to date here in chronological terms. You've done some teaching, right?

NC: Yes.

PC: At various places here and there?

NC: Yes.

PC: Where have you taught besides at Cooper Union?

NC: Well, I was visiting critic at Yale and also at Columbia University for two years.

PC: How long did you teach at Cooper?

NC: On and off about eight or nine years. And also I was visiting critic at Rhode Island School of Design and Maryland Institute. But that's just a one-day stint. And last year at Brandeis for the year.

PC: Were you living in Waltham?

NC: No, I used to commute. I used to go up there once a week and spend the night up there and come back.

PC: How do you like that? Do you think it's a . . . ?

NC: I don't like it.

PC: It's time-consuming and exhausting.

NC: It's exhausting; I just feel spent every time I get back.

PC: Are you teaching at The Studio School?

NC: They want me to teach there. I'm sort of on their faculty list of visiting artists. I taught there yesterday. I

took over Mercedes' class. She had to take a trip. And I'll be there next week. But she wants me there permanently.

PC: How do you like that idea?

NC: The School there? Very good. I think it's the best school around

PC: It's quite a different kind.

NC: There's an intensity there. There's great stress on drawing. They draw for hours.

PC: The classes are small?

NC: They're not small, no. I had a class yesterday of about fifteen or twenty students. It's nicely set up. They're very serious.

PC: I haven't seen their new building.

NC: Oh, you ought to go in there. There are wonderful studios. It's in the old Whitney Museum. I don't know, I don't mind teaching there. It's a different climate. It's more what I believe a school should be.

PC: That's interesting. How would you define what you believe a school should be?

NC: Well, I believe that a student should be there to work every day, and should work from the model, have his own class, his own studio, not be interrupted with extra-curricular activities whether it be another subject, or two-dimensional design, or lettering, you know, like most schools have. These kids work from the model. They learned to draw. They learn to see. They can draw all day long if they want to. It's an art school in the old sense.

PC: It's like an atelier.

NC: It's like an atelier. It's exactly that. And they have visiting faculty that are people who are working, you know, on the scene. And it has a big range of people, of ideas.

PC: Do you think it's important for students to have this kind of access to people who are professionally active in art?

NC: Yes, I think so. they become like a liaison into the world, too.

PC: Not just a professional teacher?

NC: That's right. Not just a professional teacher.

PC: . . . who teaches drawing one, two, three, kind of thing?

NC: That's right.

PC: That's interesting because I . . . I've often felt, always have felt, in other things that interest me that you can learn more from the professionals in a shorter time than you can from the professional teacher who's got another situation going for him.

NC: That's right. Sure.

PC: That's fascinating. Let's see, I want to talk about the shows. You had two shows at the Stable?

NC: That's right.

PC: And then you were with Staempfli?

NC: Staempfli, I had two shows with him.

PC: Have you shown much since Staempfli?

NC: Not really, no.

PC: And you were living in East Hampton at one point?

NC: Yes. I married again and we moved out to East Hampton. I lived there for about seven years.

PC: How did you like living in the country?

NC: I liked it. I used to come into New York weekly anyway because I had the class to go to. And I'd stay overnight while I was here and see the shows and then drive back.

PC: You had your studio there and you worked out there?

NC: I had my studio also.

PC: When did you moved back into New York?

NC: In 1960 I guess. Yes.

PC: So you haven't been here in this studio . . . ?

NC: I left East Hampton and moved into a studio on 57th Street called the Sherwood Studios. And I was only there for about a year and a half and then they tore the building down. I found a studio with a foreign student of mine downtown. It was a temporary thing until I found something else. I stayed there two years, I think -- I don't remember just how long. That was a miserable period. And then I found this. I've been here for about three years.

PC: This is a fantastic place.

NC: Isn't it! A marvelous place.

PC: Easy, convenient, spacious. It's terrific. Have you done other traveling besides the session in Rome and then the small trips around Italy and France? Have you traveled in this country very much? Or anyplace else?

NC: No. Just across country. I've been to California for about a month. That was a long time ago. So, I haven't really traveled in this country. Just the immediate area, Washington, Boston, Chicago.

PC: Have you any hobbies? Or are you interested in politics or any other sort of things like that?

NC: I wouldn't say so.

PC: You haven't got involved with politics the way some people . . . ?

NC: Not in depth. Not in an official way.

PC: You don't have any hobbies? You don't collect anything? Some people do and some people don't.

NC: No, I don't. Oh, I like cars. I've collected a few cars.

PC: Oh, that's a gorgeous one there. Well, why don't we just sort of stop here at this point and maybe we can do another session.

NC: Yes.

PC: Is that all right with you?

NC: Sure. Fine. [END OF SIDE ONE] [BEGIN SIDE TWO]

PC: Let's see, we have Reel 2 and today is May 17, 1968. Now I think we covered quite a number of topics on the other side and maybe we could just skip lightly over some points here and then talk about the paintings, changes in imagery and things like that.

NC: Yes.

PC: How would you evaluate the education you received in the art schools. You know, the da Vinci School and Hofmann and the AND as reaching for . . . ?

NC: For what came later? Well, I would say that my art education, let's say, starting with the Leonardo da Vinci Art School and then later to the National Academy didn't offer me too much as far as plastic knowledge is concerned. It was just being there, just exploiting your talent, mostly. They didn't teach you anything really. I don't think at the Leonardo da Vinci School you learned anything but how to use your materials. There was no plastic concept at all offered. It was just time put in, you know, and a certain discipline and a respect for the materials used, how to handle things, how to work in charcoal, and so on. At the Academy there was nothing there. There were really no teachers in that sense. The relationship with Leon Kroll was rewarding because he was more liberal. He was really an academic painter. but he had some experience in Paris. He understood French painting. He initiated you into the ideas of Cezanne and Renoir and the Impressionists mostly.

PC: Well, he knew them. His wife was introduced to him by Delaunay or someone.

NC: Oh, is that right? I didn't know that.

PC: Yes.

NC: I didn't know that.

PC: So he knew a lot of these people.

NC: He knew a lot of them. He was there at the right time. He was in the aesthetic climate of Frenchy ideas.

PC: And then Hofmann?

NC: Hofmann was probably the best experience I've ever had. It was a real experience, I would say. He understood and he taught the nature of the plane. Which is something no other school gave you. He taught you really the plastic language grounded, let's say, in the French tradition with Cubism, analytical Cubism, and so on. And we really experienced that in his classes. He made you conscious of space and the organization of the plane in abstract terms. I would say that Hofmann's teaching was the most rewarding teaching.

PC: It's interesting. I've always felt from discussion with people who studied with him that it was maybe the most atelier kind of circumstance, where he was the master in a sense. You didn't learn precisely what he did but you picked up all the feeling and the whole ambiance of the atmosphere of what was going on . . .

NC: Yes, that's true.

PC: . . . and what the other people were doing.

NC: I think you learned picture-making in essence with Hofmann.

PC: Yes.

NC: That's what it amounted to. Before Hofmann I don't think there was anybody who was teaching that sort of thing at all. And it was a real plastic experience being with him. He took you through a very deep period.

PC: That's interesting. Because there's always been that kind of feeling that what went on in his classes was different from all the other art schools.

NC: That's true. Well, before that, what was there? There was a sort of regional school of painting here.

PC: Yes.

NC: When Hofmann came was when we began to be familiar with French painting, Cubist painting, the modern movement. And a lot of the artists were curious about it but they didn't know what the approach to this attitude, you know, what is the approach to it? They didn't know.

PC: He was one of the real people and

NC: Yes, he spoke that language. And you got it in his class from nature, from the direct experience. It wasn't just theory. It was right from nature. And if you delved into it, I mean you went from a very figurative point of view into an analysis of form in plastic terms. And you started to really analyze the plane and its consequences in more synthetic realm and then into more abstract realm until it came to If you had that plastic progression, you would go into a very pure plastic point of view. It's like reducing the picture to vertical and horizontal equivalence, you know, in the Mondrian sense.

PC: Yes.

NC: After that, you were on your own, then.

PC: Did you ever get involved with his push-pull thing?

NC: Oh, absolutely! I think I went through the whole gamut of Hofmann's teaching.

PC: It's interesting, he seems to have been able to excite people about things and open doors to

NC: Yes.

PC: And there were very few teachers that can do that, it seems.

NC: Well, I really think that Hofmann was probably the greatest teacher in the world. I really do.

PC: Fantastic.

NC: And I wasn't interested in him as a painter. I was never interested in his painting.

PC: That's kind of interesting, you know.

NC: Because he wasn't really painting at that time. I mean he wasn't really showing. When I was with him

PC: He didn't show for a long period.

NC: That's right. His first show was at Peggy Guggenheim's, I think, in the early '40's. I forget the date. Right after Pollock had his first show. But that was all new to us, that kind of painting.

PC: That's interesting. Are there any other things you'd like to say about the educational experience or that kind of thing? Or do you think that's pretty well covered.

NC: It really doesn't amount to anything, except working with Hofmann. That was becoming involved, let's say, with painting.

PC: Also, it seems that he attracted the kind of person who seemed more likely to become a professional painter.

NC: That's true. They were looking for something. They were looking for a teacher, you know, to carry them beyond just their talent; to get involved, let's say, to evolve into something more; to a deeper realm, or to a deeper realm of what I don't know. but I mean it involved

PC: Complex things.

NC: It's very complex. I don't know how to express that.

PC: Well, after the school and then Leon Kroll, you went into the Army.

NC: Yes.

PC: Which we just talked about for a little while. Do you think that your work there was of any value to you in any way?

NC: Of value with what?

PC: Well, anything. Did it affect you in any way? Or was it just sort of time put in?

NC: You mean with Leon Kroll?

PC: No, in the Army.

NC: In the Army I wasn't working. I was working for the Army. The only important thing about being in the Army was that I did stop my own work and become a student again with Hofmann. I started with Hofmann while I was in the Army. I went to his classes on my furloughs or in the evenings when I was stationed on Long Island. I used to come in evenings and work with him at night.

PC: That was pretty liberal of the Army, wasn't it?

NC: Well, we were stationed really near New York. And after work hours you were free to do what you wanted to do. I came into New York for three or four hours and went back again. I had to be there for my morning duties.

PC: You mentioned you did some work with draftsmen.

NC: Well, that was in the Army. It was sort of architectural drafting.

PC: But that didn't ever mean anything?

NC: No, that didn't mean anything to me, not so far as my work as a painter is concerned.

PC: Something you did

NC: Yes, like mechanical drawing.

PC: Okay. Let's see, there are a couple of other things here. You've done some teaching which we've talked about. Have you had any other kinds of jobs Since you were in the Army?

NC: In the Army?

PC: Well, after, you know, after the Army.

NC: No. When I came out of the Army I rented a studio and started to work in the studio for myself. And started to exhibit pictures in group shows.

PC: And then you worked for the Stable for a while.

NC: Well, that was after I went to Europe. I went to Europe after being in New York for a year or so after the Army, and I went to Italy. I worked there, rented a studio and started to work and had my first exhibition there in Rome.

PC: So you really haven't had any other activities but painting and occasional teaching?

NC: No.

PC: That's terrific. Have you done any painting, anything that could come under the sort of difficult heading of experiments, either in color, which is one thing, or new materials? Any of those that they call new materials?

NC: No, I never did. I'm very traditional about my materials. It has to be oil. It took me a long time to find the kind of medium that suited my particular temperament and I stayed with that. I don't think I could work with another material. I tried acrylics, for instance. I can't do anything with it. But starting now I'm doing it again because I feel I could work with it in a limited palette, more like a drawing in black and white. Since it dries quickly it allows you to keep the picture going. It's more like a drawing so that -- I work in my drawings where the erasure becomes a very positive process; it's not negative. And when I work with the acrylics, then the fact that I could scumble over an ear with white and re-establish the plane gives me a chance to keep the picture going. And because it dries quickly I think I may be able to use it now.

PC: People have generally said it takes a few months to get used to it.

NC: Yes.

PC: Do you use collages ever?

NC: Never!

PC: Never? That's surprising because so many Hofmann people have gone into

NC: I know, I know. I have to do it directly on the surface. No, I never did.

PC: That's fantastic. I think one thing that would be kind of nice to talk about is the drawings, which you've mentioned and which seem to be very important. And you seem to have made drawings from the beginning.

NC: Yes.

PC: And still do?

NC: And I still do, yes. I don't know what to say about it except that I like to draw. I've never shown my figurative drawings ever. I've never shown them. I never felt they were satisfying to me.

PC: Well, they must be because you do it all the time.

NC: Yes, I do it all the time.

PC: And you haven't worked from a model for some time?

NC: Not for many years. I used to always work from a model, all the time. But now I work by memory. In fact, a lot of the figure drawings I do now come from an abstract approach. I arrive at the figure through working with certain spatial divisions until I come to terms with a certain image and then it develops into a figure.

PC: I don't follow

NC: I don't start the figure. I come to a figure. Because I feel that I really ultimately want to paint a figure, a figure painting, you know, which I don't think I've done yet. I've done figures, I've painted figures. But I've never

painted them, I don't think, in a situation that, let's say, would equate what is abstractly realized, let's say, in an expressionist painting, you know, in the more abstract painting. Let's say, a painting like that over there is full of imagery for me and it is a situation. It's some sort of environment. And I don't think I have taken a figurative painting into that realm yet. I mean I have painted isolated figures or isolated heads but I don't think I've painted them as I imagine I want to do.

PC: I think it's very interesting. You say you start from abstract things and develop a sort of figure, which is really the other way around.

NC: I know, I know.

PC: So many people start with a very definite image of a figure and break it out and pull it apart and turn it around and do all these things.

NC: Yes. It's very difficult to explain that process of how it happens, you know.

PC: Yes. How in the world did it ever start? Because it's such a change from what is the normal process.

NC: See, now we come to a very acute question. And how to express that is very difficult. One could say that I could start, let's say, even an abstract painting with some reference to a figure. I mean I could just do one space and to me that's symbolic of a figure, you see. And then I would work with other relationships until they start forming into a more rhythmic sense, shapes that I could hold on to and name as figure, and then, once I see it as such, then I start defining it.

PC: So it really develops in front of you on the canvas.

NC: Always! I never know what I could start a painting ten feet square, let's say, and not know what I'm going to do. I just start automatically, you see, I start with an automatic and then it grows.

PC: That's interesting. There are so many different attacks and developments. With some people the whole thing is in their head, you know. And the doing of it is just "click" like a camera.

NC: Yes. I can't do that. Render it, you mean?

PC: Yes. That's interesting that it really goes from one thing to another. Do you draw when you do the painting? Do you draw on the canvas?

NC: No, I never do. I start immediately with paint. Just get involved with that. Because I feel that it's all one. I don't separate drawing from painting. I don't separate organizing the surface from really drawing. I think that's drawing. Drawing to me is designing space really, organizing it. It's not just rendering a particular form as people . . . calling it that drawing an arm or a head or a figure. Drawing is like the total space. And that goes through so many changes, you know, until one arrives at a certain plane outside of, say, the metric space of the picture plane itself. It becomes another space. It's more space than imagination.

PC: That's right. I notice you have lots of pencil drawings. So you make drawings with crayons or brush or ink?

NC: Well, I made these drawings with a brush, if you want to call them drawings. I don't know what to call them.

PC: Let somebody else worry about the term.

NC: Yes. I work with pencil and crayons like those, you see, drawings like that. I prefer straight pencil drawing in the pure sense. I don't use water color or gouache. I very rarely do that, very rarely.

PC: Well, how would you say -- which is a real problem here -- your imagery has developed and changed? When do you feel that you really started with your own kind of . . . ?

NC: When you say "imagery," what do you mean in painting? From what to what?

PC: Well, say, when you were in school you were given a still life to paint or you had a model and that was a problem to do that day or week or whatever it was. Well, when do you think after that point that you started doing your own kind of picture, your own image, the kind of think that you felt was your own step and away from It's very hard to phrase.

NC: It can be answered, but I don't know how to phrase it so that it covers everything in what that change is. You have to understand, first of all, that I've exhibited mostly as an abstract expressionist painter.

PC: Right.

NC: When it isn't art there's something missing of these two things.

PC: That's interesting. Did you ever find that . . . ? Do you still paint abstractly?

NC: Yes, I've been painting The other day I was painting abstractly; just the other day. But when I paint abstractly it's always with a figurative Behind it all is whether this is going to be that picture I really want to paint, you see.

PC: So it is constant . . . ?

NC: It's a very strange thing because I feel that it goes two ways, you see. It's a question probably of choice. You can take a picture going and get it more and more abstract by simplification and saying the most with the least means. And that's very satisfying, too. But then you reach a state where you just can't go beyond it somehow, you know. And then there is this other think where you deal with a figurative situation. There's something of life's experience involved where you can equate it and it gives you more to do.

PC: That's interesting. Do you think, then, that there's more of human relationship to figurative painting than to highly abstract and non-objective pictures?

NC: That's a big question, but I think so. I would say so, yes.

PC: I find it very difficult. I have some drawings, about half of them have figures and the other half don't. And you move them around on the wall. Sometimes they work together and sometimes it's a terrific clash. And yet they're practically all black and white and this sort of thing. That poses different ideas. Well, the thing that interest me here with you is the fact that there are Well, now to me there seem to be three different things. There seems to be the abstract painting, the paintings with the figurative idea, and the sculpture. You've got three activities going.

NC: Yes. Well, I don't want to separate them, you see. Now, let's say, in the sculpture I've worked with the figure. But in order to get at the form I work with a light concept, you see. How can you express that verbally without seeing the material, you know, how the materials work? In order to get at a form I work in a rhythmic sense, you see. And I work from a multiple point of view towards that form. It's not just one point of view towards the form. It's multiple because of its rhythmic continuity. And I feel that you can stay with the form for a long, long time, you know, if you're trying to capture, say, the light and hold the light so it doesn't escape you. So the form is just a medium for you to hold light. And then the manipulation of the planal elements that construct this form are constantly shifting so that they will make a configuration with light and not with the material.

PC: That's interesting.

NC: So ultimately I see the figure becoming really very pure form. I don't just see it as an anatomical

PC: It's also an atmospheric kind of thing because of the light and the I don't mean diffused.

NC: Well, no, it's not. It's atmospheric only in the sense that it has presence in space, you see.

PC: Right. That's interesting.

NC: Now that's a very complex thing or me to express. Sculpture to me is working with light and not so much working in three dimensions.

PC: That's fascinating. Well, I remember they're all three-dimensional figures. You have no low reliefs or plaques or anything like that.

NC: No, no, it's in the round. It's completely seeing the round as a form.

PC: Yes. It's very funny. You know, I've had so many discussions now with sculptors and it's odd to talk to somebody who does both painting and sculpture. You're the only one of the people I mean you're the only artist I've talked to who does both.

NC: A lot of them do, don't they?

PC: Not of the group that I talked to.

NC: Oh, really?

PC: No. They're all pretty well defined. You know, this is this, and this is that, and that's something else. You're

the only one, I think, yes, who really does painting. Occasionally some of the painters made an odd piece of sculpture here or there, but it's very peripheral. With you it's the major statement. Your plan now is to go to Italy and start casting?

NC: Well, cast and also work there. I still feel I want to do more with the sculpture. I'd like to make a major piece out of all these little things I've been working with to sort of see if I can with one figure bring all the experience together. You know, make one statement, if possible, with the figure.

PC: I don't know how one It's so hard sometimes to talk about visual things with words because they both mean different things. You say you've always been interested in the figure. But, you know, I can look at that pointing there and I can see there is a figurative element there maybe, and maybe it isn't; and that is and maybe it isn't. And, you know, this could be some there's always ambiguity and there's always I don't know how to say it, it's not a It doesn't fit in any of the critical little bags of definition.

NC: I know. And that's why I've always had a very difficult time also with the critics. They don't see it. They only saw it in the framework of, let's say, an abstract expressionist metaphysics. And they categorized me within that realm. Which I wasn't really. I really am not.

PC: I think there are only two or three people who ever fit really into that.

NC: Well, they fit in their limited way into what is named Abstract Expressionism. But I don't think that is a concluded idea. I think Abstract Expressionism was an involvement in flux; it was becoming something. And it went two ways, I think. It could have gone very, very abstract, or minimal, let's say, or to a configuration of forms that either identify with nature or the unconscious elements that were also included.

PC: Well, let me ask you, when was this painted?

NC: 1960, I think.

PC: That's interesting because I notice such large planes of color. It's a very cool kind of picture for that time when everything was still churning over.

NC: That's right. Because this was also going toward a very hard-edge kind of painting. It was

PC: Did you ever do hard-edge type painting or something that would fall . . . ?

NC: Well, I have done it. In the process of these pictures I did. You see, this goes through so many stages before, let's say, it is left at a particular state. See, this is also in flux, too. You see, there are figures in there but they're not naturalistic figures. More symbolic elements. It's a Surrealist painting in a way.

PC: Yes. Well, there seems to be How would you describe . . . ? The Surrealist thing is interesting. Did that start when you met Matta? Or was it before? Because you say you were so friendly with him.

NC: I was very friendly with him. He was a very big influence at the time. He made me see what was already inherent in the work and said to develop in that direction. And I did.

PC: So then you certainly can't look back and say that it's Matta's influence.

NC: No, it isn't. No. But you see for me that's an indication of the kind of picture that is coming, you know. I would like to really isolate them. And probably that's why I'm doing sculpture because then I see the figure completely in itself.

PC: Well, it's interesting, because when you do sculpture it's a different relationship to your image in a sense. It's something having literally three dimensions in your hands rather than an idea of working it out.

NC: Well, it's subject to change depending on its development, you see. You could work with, say, a leg that is representative of a leg in an anatomical sense but then as you're working toward a purification of the form then it gets a little more abstract because you're working with space and light and then it's subject to transformation, let's say, into a more symbolic leg or symbolic arm. Do you know what I mean?

PC: When did you get interested in light in this way?

NC: Well, I got involved with that through my own painting and drawing, this kind of thing where I found that I was starting to work with intervals. But the interval then, instead of becoming just interstices between elements, I found out it became the total plane, you see. And the more you went into the plane the more you, say, brought it forward or to surface. And that had some meaning. Well, I can't really define that process to you. But I found that the plane had to be a light plane to come to surface.

PC: Rather than a color plane?

NC: Yes. Well, it's just the same thing, too. I mean I don't divorce the color plane from the light plane. Each one has his own terminology for this.

PC: Yes. I mean in a sense you can do something with light almost in grisaille or monochromes.

NC: You can do something with light in black and white.

PC: Right.

NC: You can say that to bring the plane to surface with a certain dimensional process In other words, each painting develops in plane towards dimension. And when I say that, I mean the total plane is constantly bringing forth The more it comes up to you, the more it is a light symbol. The more you bring up the plane, the more you're coming towards light, you see.

PC: Right. Oh, I see what you mean.

NC: And the more you come towards the light, say, light unity, the more the plane develops in scale, too. It's a dimensional process is all I can say towards the plane.

PC: Yes. That's fascinating. When was this drawing done?

NC: At the same time as that. I had a show with George Staempfli where I had a room of drawings of this kind.

PC: This was in 1956.

NC: 1960, I think was the last time. The last show was 1960-1961.

PC: Yes. Well, really your central interest, I guess, through all this still centers around the figure and attitudes toward it and . . . ?

NC: What I think this is is really a figure situation. Now mostly you're involved with unconscious elements when you're painting. It becomes an interior world when it is that. But then there is also an outside world. Now I don't divorce the two, really. I visualize painting the picture or a figure situation that includes both. In other words, it is a psychological reality outside of the physical, you see.

PC: Right.

NC: How this is done depends upon how one lives in the life, you know, how you respond to the outside world, how present you are to it, how integrated you are. In other words, there is this dialogue going on between an inner and outer world. But to paint the picture of that It hasn't been done really, I don't think.

PC: That's the problem.

NC: Well, if you want to call it a problem It might be my problem. It may not be anyone else's.

PC: Are there any artists that you've been particularly interested in?

NC: Gee, there's the whole history of art. Yes, I would say Piero della Francesca would be a great influence. Of my own time, I would say Matta definitely and Gorky. Which I relate to. I also am interested in the work of Balthus, for instance, who is a contemporary, who is doing figurative painting. But he has psychological overtones.

PC: Do you know him? Have you met him?

NC: No. I probably will meet him this summer when I go to Italy. He's now director of the French Academy. And he also is a friend of Matta. I told Matta that I would like to meet Balthus and Matta said he would arrange that. So I think this summer I probably will get to see him.

PC: Are there any others?

NC: Matisse, Picasso, Giacometti. These are people that interest me. Marcel Duchamp is very important. And it was Matta that made me really delve into Duchamp.

PC: In what way?

NC: I was involved with a certain kind of space myself at the time of not just coming to the four corners but also

coming from the outside in, constructing a space really from a multiple point of view, and not just from one point of view, seeing it from all sides. And that had some influence on how the picture developed, in the sense that the situation was not only seen from one point of view. It was possible for you, with this multiple idea of space, to start considering complexes within a picture, you know, where you could paint memory or present or future, that kind of thing.

PC: That's interesting. Of all these people you've mentioned, I think the only one who's identified with the Surrealists is Matta.

NC: Yes.

PC: Picasso is a peripheral association at best.

NC: Yes.

PC: But you seem to have had a feeling for the spirit of Surrealism rather than any particular images.

NC: That's right. Mostly the spirit of it.

PC: It's getting more and more so, I think. I think the younger people are more conscious, let's say, of Surrealist ideas than they were, say, twenty years or fifteen years ago.

PC: But it's very different from European Surrealism.

NC: Well, I don't know what that is.

PC: Well, the images they use, either the Surrealist writers or the Surrealist painters. Here they have a different vocabulary.

NC: Well, each person is different. It depends on how true you are to yourself and your experience before it becomes an image of any kind. It's not a borrowed thing. It's not taken from the outside. It comes out of yourself.

PC: Yes, it grows out. I was thinking of the figures in there. I've been looking at this one and thinking Do you have any mythological interests? Or sort of heroes involved with the ideas in the sculpture?

PC: Heroes?

PC: Yes. In the mythological sense. Or that kind of

NC: Yes, I think so. But I couldn't express it. I wouldn't be able to express that.

PC: I don't know where that idea came from, but thinking of

NC: Well, when you look at some of those heads -- take a look at those heads -- for instance, they're really not portraits of anything. They are images I think of states of being.

PC: A kind of monumental

NC: Yes. I'm more concerned with whether the image evolves and has its presence, you see. And it also goes two ways, that the state of arrival is determined by conscious and unconscious elements. And if I can get a head, let's say, that I feel is present I feel that I've achieved something. It's there. Because then I could also stop working on it more from a more formal point of view, you know, afterwards and sort of polish it up.

PC: Oh, I see what you mean. Right.

NC: But I'm more concerned with it being present. And what that image is really . . . I don't know . . . some moment of truth, I guess. You know, walking a tightrope between being and not being. Just that moment where you feel that interval is caught, you know, where the reality is, I think.

PC: Yes.

NC: That particular focus of presence, you see.

PC: Yes. It's a sort of difficult thing to talk about. It's apparent but it's intangible. You sense it.

NC: Yes.

PC: [My notes are illegible.] We have talked a little bit about you and the teaching. You said that people like you

as a teacher but you don't usually find teaching rewarding for you. Now, after the teaching experience you've had, what do you think is the role of a teacher in an art school? And what do you think you can do for students as a teacher?

NC: I think that what you can do is just give the student a certain plastic experience that opens up areas for him to pursue. You can't stay with him watching him pursue it. It's just that he has to be . . . he must see the possibilities of a particular plastic concept that allows him to choose his path. And you must give him, I think, a very wide range of experience and not limit him with just pedagogical principles. It has to be out of experience, you see.

PC: Yes.

NC: It has I feel that if one could give the student a knowledge of the plane and its language then it's possible for him to go on with it outside of school. That's the role of the teacher, I think.

PC: It's interesting. It sounds to me as if you mean the student really must use the teacher.

NC: Absolutely! Absolutely! He has to draw out of the teacher what he needs. Otherwise this teacher can give and by giving he spends himself, you see. Nothing is coming back. The part I don't like about teaching is when you feel obligated to give, and you're giving to people that are not responding and giving it back, somehow. There's got to be that dialogue.

PC: It's a one-way street

NC: When it's a one-way street, it's death. And, boy, I'm telling you it's a spending and it's hard to get it back. At least, I feel that very, very strongly. And I am asked to teach everywhere and I have never asked for a teaching job. And if people ask me and I say "No," now I weigh it with vehemence. I really do. Because I feel it's like taking away my soul. It's like draining me.

PC: The pound of flesh.

NC: That's right. You have no idea, that is, if you teach that way. For me teaching is creative.

PC: Well, you must get very involved.

NC: I get very involved and deeply involved. And the students, if they are sensitive, are hooked in a way and they won't let go because they want to be safe, they want to feel secure with what you've given them and not wait to go through the tunnel themselves, you see. They need to lean on you all the time. And that leaning is a pressure, boy.

PC: You have 20 or 30 or 40 or whatever number of students it is.

NC: Yes And I was teaching at Cooper Union and Yale at the same time. At Cooper Union I must have had, let's say 30 students. And then at Yale I had 20. And that's 50 people. And each one you treat individually. You don't teach like a class. I don't teach that way. I teach individually. I feel the particular temperament of the student, where his talent leads, and I try to teach him on what basically he is involved with.

PC: That's a lot of people to sort out and keep organized.

NC: That's a lot of people.

PC: It's like living 50 lives.

NC: Exactly. And in a day or two. Then you find you come back to your studio and you're depleted; you have nothing to say to yourself.

PC: Well, that must be very time-consuming and exhausting just to go to Hartford and back to New York.

NC: That's not the problem. I don't mind driving a car for the four hours, you know, up to Boston and coming back because that's relaxing for me. At least I'm with myself.

PC: You like to drive?

NC: I love to drive. And it's the time I'm with myself, so I don't find that fatiguing or tiring or spending.

PC: That's interesting. There can be great relaxation in driving. Moving off into a pattern

NC: Yes.

PC: You've mentioned before -- I don't know if you even want to go into this -- that you are interested in esoteric levels in religion and that there is some association with that in your work.

NC: Well, that gets into a metaphysical realm and I think my plastic ideas have a relationship to it. It has something to do with levels of consciousness and using, let's say, the plastic language as a means of pursuing that path to reality. It also involves the language itself as a method for self-knowledge. When I say the esoteric, I mean there is a certain knowledge that one can go to in a certain way but it's a discipline and a way of life.

PC: That is the approach to this?

NC: Well, the approach is not unlike a mystic going towards certain disciplines for self-knowledge. I mean there are paths for it, you know. It's hard for me to, say, equate what is plastically language outside of picture-making or making things or decorative elements. You know what I mean? But just the idea that the plane itself is sort of an absolute ground for me. Then one delves into it and starts recreating what one probes. One probes the plane. One recreates the plane. In that there is a certain discipline, an action to bring out elements of the self from the conscious or unconscious realm. There's a duality in the actual process that has a lot to do with one's ultimate aim of realizing oneself, integrating oneself, let's say.

PC: As a total person. Yes.

NC: As a total person.

PC: That's interesting. You were interested in -- I can't read his name -- the Russian.

NC: Oh, Gurdjieff?

PC: Yes.

NC: Well, that's one of the disciplines I was talking about. I find that the greatest work of art is man himself. Now there have been schools that taught man to become more than himself. There are disciplines in that path.

PC: What would they be? What schools?

NC: Well, that's one school, the Gurdjieffian school. The Christian school. The Egyptian school. The Persian school. The Chinese school. There are many schools, you see. I find relationship with that and the plastic process. I find it very similar. In fact, when I teach I draw on these two things.

PC: Oh, really?

NC: And I offer that through my experience.

PC: How would you do that? I've never had that sort of association with teachers. I can't really visualize how you do it.

NC: How would you do it? It's very difficult to say how you would do it. It's not a program. It comes out of what you draw on to relate to a student's state of being, what stage he's in in his experience. You can say that a mystic when he does through the stages of temptation is delving into an unconscious realm. And he could be caught up in that realm and lose himself. And yet he can transcend it. The same thing happens in a work of art. You can get involved with unconscious imagery and get lost in it. If you don't have, let's say, that concept of arriving at unit. You're using the conscious idea that is selecting and making choices. If you don't make any choices, you just go deeply involved with an unconscious thing and I think, after, you can have the painting absorb you, you know, and never get out of it. You drift away from it.

PC: So it means you have to maintain a constant interplay of discipline.

NC: That's the way I feel about it, yes. Because it's not only the act of just that interplay as a process, it's the thing about whether you're going to find the reconciling factor which is going to be the creative element, you see. Just as painting deals with relationships though contrast and opposition. There's also synthesis in that play. And synthesis is found in the third element created. The created thing then changes the plane because it's now in a new environment.

PC: It's a new thing.

NC: It's a new thing. And then from there, that's your frame of reference, say, for the cycle in the continuation of the work. And its continuation is motivated already by the fact that you believe, and this is part of the concept, that there are dimensions in levels of consciousness. You see, you can come to unity on one stage of experience and then, once you have, then you date to take another adventure and take it into another dimension, you see.

So there are levels of -- I call them planal levels. You might say this idea is also very Christian. Just as the parables have many levels of meaning. To reach the highest plane of meaning, you'd have to get into the consciousness of Jesus Christ. And I think art deals with that. I feel it does.

PC: It's interesting that you have an interest in figurative work and this spiritual attitude. And yet there was a time when it was almost relegated to people who were total abstractionists who would have a mystical attitude.

NC: Well, yes. You see, that's where abstract experience takes me, you know. Because of the experience I see where it relates. I don't just divorce one experience from another. And when I say a figurative painting, I mean it in a symbolic sense, too. I don't mean it just in the three-dimensional physical sense. There's the psychological dimension for it to become meaningful, you know.

PC: Well, I think that's the underlying factor.

NC: And I also feel that the whole spatial space concept in bringing this about also has to be of our time. I mean, I don't think we can work with the Renaissance space and come to the figure and find a psychological image that's of our time. I don't think that's true. Do you see what I mean? I mean, we're living

PC: Yes, because we are living in a different way.

NC: That's right. It gives you a new space. It's a multiple point of view, this reality. And in order to get that figure to be symbolic, it has to integrate with that spatial idea. Otherwise, we depend on our talents and there's a whole canon laid out for us, let's say, Renaissance canon. We could learn that very easily. I don't think that's very difficult for us now.

PC: Learn to study and organize.

NC: That's right. You can, you know. You can respect even the scientific ideas of the time that motivated the picture structure.

PC: Right. But that's not today.

NC: Well, one of the things that has fascinated me more about contemporary art than old art is the struggle for the identification of it, you know. the materialization of what is the image of us. What do we do today?

NC: Yes. Well, we're more conscious of ourselves today. We have the language of psychology, really.

PC: I don't think that makes it any easier.

NC: It doesn't make it easier. It makes it more difficult, I think.

PC: I think it gives you a lot of words to play games with. Once in a while they might open a little window or something, or turn on a light here or there. But that, too, can become more of a wall than a help really. It's one of the things I've had a terrific interest in Renaissance and old pictures for years and then I changed because they were beautiful things, but they weren't living the way the things were that I saw going on around me. I like to live today.

NC: Yes, I think, let's say, in this more figurative sense -- and I have to use the word "figurative" -- and I don't mean just the anatomical figure, I mean the symbolic figure -- I think today what we're concerned with, let's say I would be, would be that interval between things, what does that feeling look like between things? You go through a passage, what does this passage look like? You see, if we have this idea of space where we see the form from a multiple point of view it also means that we understand it internally. It's not just the outside of it. It's also the inside of it.

PC: Well, you've got another structure.

NC: That's right. Now, in order to get at that structure, there's a space concept that has to be used to make this thing valid or feel at least that it is a motivating factor to express, say, this idea. If you don't have that space concept, how are you going to do it?

PC: Let's see, I was wondering if there are other things We haven't talked really about your ideas about what's going on today in the general art scene. I don't know if you want to comment on that.

NC: I don't know how. That's too vast an area.

PC: Well, you know, you can make a list: Pop, OP, Minimal

NC: I'm for all of this, strangely enough. I mean I don't see myself as being divorced from it even with my own ideas. I'm not divorced from it. I think I understand that Minimal thing, I think. I deal with it myself in a way. Only I don't arrive at a minimal. The Pop thing is really the kind of picture I really want to paint, too. I want to do it in plastic terms and I don't think the Pop artists are doing it plastically. Do you understand what I mean by that?

PC: Well, let me ask you the obvious question then: how do you define "plastic?"

NC: Whew! That's become a hackneyed word, I'm afraid.

PC: It's a word that everybody uses.

NC: I can't explain it. It's too difficult for me to explain. I don't know how to get at that. I would say this: the Abstract Expressionists were dealing with painting in a plastic sense. Now I don't think that anything that's been done since was not inherent in abstract expressionism. You say Pop art. There's Pop in abstract expressionism; only it comes out of a deep involvement of the plastic means to bring it about. The Pop artists were divorced from the plastic means. They were just commercially using, you know, elements to give you a visual representation of it, you see. It's a very commercial idea, I think.

PC: Are there any people, you know, say, sort of younger artists who are painting or doing things these days who interest you? That you can think of?

NC: Well, there's Larry Poons, for instance, I like very much. But they don't come to mind strongly.

PC: Larry Poons!

NC: In sculpture, Tony Smith. What's his . . . ? I confuse those There's David Smith.

PC: Richard Smith?

NC: No.

PC: Leon Smith?

NC: The sculptor who's an architect; he teaches at Hunter College.

PC: Oh, Tony Smith?

NC: Tony Smith, yes. I like Tony Smith's work. It's . . .

PC: Yes, big, large.

NC: . . . simple. You could call it maybe minimal, if you want. See, he's in the realm of sculpture and there is an image there. And the same thing with Larry Poons. I don't know what category you put him in. But he's one of the young people working today. I can't think of anybody else.

PC: They come and they go at different times. Have you exhibited much recently in any of the big museum group shows?

NC: No, I haven't; I didn't want to. I've been invited to many of them. But it means that I have to get my pictures out, you know, frame them, ship them. I don't want to be bothered with any of that. I'm not interested in it.

PC: There's no value of any kind in it?

NC: To me, I don't feel there is. I just want to be with myself trying to realize what I want to do and not just show for the sake of showing.

PC: Do you think that what goes on with you in art and things has any kind of attitude towards this communication? Do you think painting is for you a way of communicating?

NC: Yes, I think so. I think that, if the picture does come to that symbolic realm, and I think ultimately what a picture is is a symbol of consciousness, I think then it has power of communication on a spiritual level. And I think that it does reach, it does communicate. But it's not for the general mass. It's for those people who are tuned in on that level. I think that's true of all great art. I really do.

PC: Looking at pictures is not just fluff.

NC: That's right.

PC: You've got to work at it. I hate this question which they put in here, which is involved with

NC: What are those, a set of questions?

PC: No, just sort of topics. They're not real They're just things to talk about, you know, here and there. Do you think there's any involvement on your part with, oh, escape from reality or fantasy in the paintings?

NC: There might be a tendency towards that. But I wipe it out when it happens.

PC: Oh, really?

NC: Yes. I don't want fantasy. I want imagination. That's another level of consciousness.

PC: A more aware kind of thing.

NC: Yes. I think that fantasy is an escape, but I don't think imagination is. Because I think imagination is a very creative area of experience. It's prophetic, you might say.

PC: Where you can just build and build and build.

NC: Yes.

PC: And then fantasy is . . . ?

NC: Is an indulgence, I think. It's an indulgence into areas of escapism, titillating. It's really about the personality, you know.

PC: It's not productively rewarding.

NC: That's right.

PC: That's a good differentiation. It's exactly what

NC: It's very difficult to differentiate, by the way. It's a big area and you have to really probe that area to understand its meaning. It's taken for granted too much, I think. People say "fantasy" when they mean "imagination;" they say "imagination" when they mean "fantasy." There is a great difference.

PC: Yes. Oh, sure. Fantasy once in a while might help but you certainly can't grow out of it. Nothing ever adds up.

NC: That's right.

PC: Oh, you said you had an anecdote about John Graham.

NC: I don't know if it's . . . whether that's important.

PC: Well

NC: It's just an anecdote. I told you about my relationship with him and I had something to do with his having a show. The anecdote had something to do with his appreciation of the fact that I was aware of him and did something about bringing him into the art world again. And the show was sort of well received by the artists because the artists . . . many of them didn't know of his work, you know, prior to his sort of retirement in a way. And when we showed him again, there was a wonderful response by all the, let's say, avant garde artists in New York. but he died two or three years later. He was in England, I think, when he died. It was one summer. And I was in Southampton that summer. And I was driving down Main Street and I passed sort of an antique shop and saw a picture in the window. I made a quick U turn and went back and into the store and asked the lady in the shop how much was that . . . the price of the painting in the window. She said, "One dollar." And I said, "I'll take it." And it was a John Graham painting.

PC: That's fantastic.

NC: And the strange thing is that I sold the picture later on for \$1,800. And I took the \$1,800 and I figured, well, this was a gift from John Graham in appreciation of what I had done for him; it might have some meaning in continuing my own work so that I could have a sort of little financial security. So I took the \$1,800 and I invested it. And it tripled. So that was the story, from a dollar picture to I don't know how much now. But I feel somehow that

PC: How could she sell the picture for dollar?

NC: That's what's so strange.

PC: Incredible!

NC: Incredible! One dollar -- it wasn't \$18 or \$20, but one dollar. Sort of like the lowest common denominator in exchange.

PC: Absolutely incredible!

NC: Yes. Then the funny thing about that afterwards was that I sold it to Noah Goldowsky. Do you know Noah? And then he became involved with Graham's estate from that. He's involved now. So it has a generative thing going on, building up.

PC: That's marvelous. Well, are there any other things that you'd like to talk about?

NC: I hate to talk about I feel that with all these questions one has to ponder, you know, for a long time and strip it bare and come to an essence and very clear expression.

PC: You know, the whole sort of idea behind these things, the interviews is that it does . . . obviously just skims off the top. And it reflects more or less a kind of normal conversational attitude, level, that sort of thing. I think if you really sit down and start to think about one point and go over it, it becomes terribly difficult.

NC: Yes, it does.

PC: And it goes 'round and 'round and 'round.

PC: Yes. That's an involvement in itself.

NC: Like writing a book about

PC: I feel very uncomfortable about questions like that anyway. I'm not doing myself justice, I feel.

PC: I've heard a couple of people say, "Now, you know, when you really do an interview . . . you avoid some of those questions. But, you know, if you think about things and you're involved in it, there's a certain

NC: Yes, but, you see, you have to think about a lot of those things and sometimes you think about them and you express them clearly; and then sometimes when you have to answer them in another context extemporaneously, you feel that you haven't even touched the surface of what you really are trying to say.

PC: Yes. Well, I don't know, I guess that's about all.

NC: Well, good enough for me.

PC: Okay, I'll whip it off here. [END OF INTERVIEW]

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