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Oral history interview with Barbara  
Swan, 1973 June 13-1974 June 12

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Barbara Swan on 1973 June 13-1974 June 12. The interview was conducted by Robert Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. This is a rough transcription that may include typographical errors.

## Interview

ROBERT BROWN: This is an interview with Barbara Swan. It's June 13th, 1973. Perhaps to begin, could you talk a bit about your—your childhood and were there any early interests related to art?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, yes. First of all, I mean, it's significant to say that I'm an only child and I grew up in a background where there was no art and I had—my parents were both natives of Rockport, Massachusetts, which is a famous art colony, and because they were natives, my father coming from Swedish parents and his father was foreman of a granite quarry. My mother was a very old Yankee and her family came over in the 17th Century, settling in Gloucester, and then in the Pigeon Cove section of Rockport. They supposedly built their own boat and, you know, they became—around the time, not too long after the Mayflower but they—they, you know, were on their own.

Now this was—this is a background of old settled natives and immigrants, Swedish immigrants, where my Swedish grandfather was the first—had been born in Sweden. So my father, I'd say, was the first generation.

ROBERT BROWN: Came for the granite quarries?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, he came—he was a stone—he—and he eventually became foreman of one of them. I think he, you know, was a man of—of ability in that particular area, but because of this background on the part of my parents, as children growing up and then, you know, having the background of—of community in Rockport which had nothing to do with artists and they had a kind of resentment in a sense of—of the artists moving in—

ROBERT BROWN: Who were there at this time, weren't they?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, the art—

ROBERT BROWN: Coming in?

BARBARA SWAN: The art colony, back in, you know, early—the early 20th Century, I think, I think you began to see artists because my father was, I mean, you know, like in his 20s. Then he, you know, went away because he, you know, had work elsewhere, but—but they already had a sense that these rather eccentric types were, you know, in and—and the artists in those days were—were a very small group but—but they had a lifestyle and my parents considered—I don't know whether you'd say threatening but certainly not what they would—were used to or even approved of and although my father's sister-in-law had a brother, Lester Stevens, who was really quite an eminent artist, but there again, you know, they—they didn't really care that much for him either, I don't think, you know. I mean, he wasn't—he was—he was, you know, quite a distinguished landscape artist, but—but—but what I think is—is amusing in terms of my being an artist was that—that—and my father has quite a lot of humor and he was—you know, would frankly joke and say, you know, the last thing we would have expected of our one and only daughter was that she should, you know, be an artist. That was—

ROBERT BROWN: Do you think they thought artists were sort of ne'er-do-wells or—

BARBARA SWAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —didn't go to work regularly?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, and—and they, you know, loafed—you see, I think my parents—I don't know. Did I mention that my mother's father was a sea captain and—

ROBERT BROWN: No.

BARBARA SWAN: No, I didn't mention that. Well, he—he was a captain of a boat that went up and down the coast delivering granite—

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: —and he delivered most of the granite for the Longfellow Bridge in Boston.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: And, you know, there are a number of—of paving, streets with granite paving which my grandfather was responsible for bringing to Boston and he—

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: —died in his late 40s tragically in, I believe, Portsmouth, New Hampshire. He was hit—hit by a derrick which fell on him and—but I think, you see, when you consider that this sea captain father on my mother's side and the granite industry foreman on my father, that this was solid, you know, very—

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: —good worthy labor, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Mainstream of the local economy—

BARBARA SWAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —too.

BARBARA SWAN: Right. Yes, yes, at that time, although the granite industry went defunct with the invention of concrete.

But—so I—you know, they would have been infinitely happier if I had, you know, been somewhat interested in a more solid type of pursuit, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, did you grow up in Rockport?

BARBARA SWAN: No. I grew up in Newton because my father, he, first of all, went to General Electric School in Lynn which was not too far, and he was going to work his way up into the General Electric Company which has a huge complex in Lynn, and I think he did very well and I even have the feeling that if he stayed, he could have been an executive because a classmate of his became a very high executive and my father certainly had an equal ability, but he had—I don't know quite how it occurred, but—but there came an offer to teach in the Newton High School and it was Engineering, Mechanical and Engineering Drawing, which is nothing to do with my kind of drawing. It's a very precise, you know, straight lines, rulers, and—and that. Of course, my father had always been a fussy spot about perspective when he looks at something. It's not right.

He decided and maybe my mother encouraged the idea that he didn't think he really, in view of his whole life thing, wanted to be tied to a factory whistle and—and there was something about being a teacher, you'd have a long summer vacation and you'd have, you know, the less—less of this kind of pressure. If you're—if you're with General Electric, you know, there's this whistle and you're—everybody's there and everybody goes home at the same time and it's kind of regimented and I think that he made a very wise choice, although it ended up, you know, he never made much money, you see.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, yeah. But when you came to Newton, that's more within the Boston area.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, and I—I grew up in—in a community with very good academic opportunities, more so than if, say, I'd grown up in Rockport, because the Newton School System had then and still does a very fine reputation and—and I was a good student, you

know.

ROBERT BROWN: What were you interested in then?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I was always—but I always wanted to draw, you see. That's the incredible thing is that I cannot remember any time when I did not want to draw and I did not consider that I was going to be an artist. It was inevitable. I was given piano lessons and they were a total disaster. You know, I took three years and I totally blocked it all out and I can't—don't even sit at the piano, and I think that my father and mother sort of capitulated and that, you know, then I remember when I was 10 years old, I did a drawing of my grandmother and it looked just like her and everybody was astounded by that, you know, that kind of—and they—I mean, it's just that I was producing things that—that had an obvious sense that I could, you know, do this well, you know, and I think then—then a sort of parental pride takes over—

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: —and, well, you know, she's, you know, gifted, I mean, and then we've got to, you know, do right by that. So when I was a child, I remember being taken into Boston to the Boston Museum where they had children's classes and I went Saturday mornings to some of those classes and then after a while, I—also, I think one year it was at the Massachusetts College of Art that I went to Saturday morning classes and then finally I studied with an artist named Harold Rotenberg and who had Saturday morning classes at 30 Ipswich Street which is that wonderful building of artist studios and I thought that was—I was, you know, very thrilling because I was in an artist studio. You know, it wasn't that I was in with a bunch of other children but by then, I was in my adolescence or into my teens, you see, when I was doing this.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, how was the teaching at the—at the Boston Museum, at the Massachusetts School?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, you know, I don't have much recollection because it was—we were in a group situation and we'd all be told, you know, make—well, like if it was autumn, we'd be, you know, do an autumn picture and—and, you know, everyone sort of did the same assignment. I'm sure that now there perhaps would be more individual sets of projects.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: I mean, I think I was—and I—I felt myself rather submerged and I didn't sense that I came—came through as being any—in any way more gifted or even—or even different from the others. You know, we just all—I think it was much more conformance kind of approach to art than—

ROBERT BROWN: Did they try to develop skill?

BARBARA SWAN: I—I suppose in a way, like they might, you know, show you how to be a little neater, you know. That would make no sense now, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Sure.

BARBARA SWAN: You're supposed to—you know, the more splatters, you know, the more mess.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, with Harold Rotenberg, were you the only pupil?

BARBARA SWAN: Oh, no. There were others and it would be a small group and—and I was astounded recently that somebody who's quite good, who said he studied with Harold Rotenberg. I think there were others in this Boston area who studied with him and—and I'll have to try to think of who that is because, you know, it was—we were very amused that we had had this same beginning.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, did you study painting with him?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, yes, oil painting, yeah, and—and I—you know, he gave me a semblance of technique and confidence and he'd have a model and my real interest was, you know, the human face because I—I always could get a likeness and I think that—I think that's a fluke. I think it has absolutely nothing to do with how great an artist you are. I think

there are fantastically-profound brilliant artists who can't get a damn likeness no matter what they do and then there—there are the most superficial non-entities who can just touch the paper and immediately it's a likeness. I mean, haven't you noticed that?

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, yes. So again, you're saying skill has nothing—as you—

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I just think that the likeness is an innate thing. You're born with it. I don't know why, but—and I don't know what—why one person can draw a face and it's a dead ringer and another person can draw a structurally beautiful profound thing and it doesn't—it could be, you know, 10 dozen other people, it doesn't really look like him.

ROBERT BROWN: Your father must have appreciated this—your manual skill in doing this?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes. You see, the fact that I could get a likeness was, you know, impressive. I mean, this—this—you see, this he could understand, you see.

ROBERT BROWN: Sure, sure. It's pretty stunning.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. Oh, yes, and—and for me, it was—it was kind of even almost like a showing-off, you know. You'd sit down and you'd say, oh, well, you know, sit for me and—and the other artist in this area that can do this is Arthur Polonsky [ph] who's a great buddy, and he—he has this feeling for like, too, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, did you have it back at the high school in Newton? Did you have—

BARBARA SWAN: Oh, yes, yes. Oh, I took—well, the instruction was pretty awful in Newton High because it was a big school and I remember I—actually, see, I was in the college preparatory and I had very, you know, highly-challenging academic role and—and so I took the—maybe one brief class a week and there again it was just a whole group. You know, we all sat in desks in rows and somebody—we'd all draw the same thing and it was in no sense—it was just a big bore.

In fact, I remember in 7th Grade being so bored by the art that I was a behavior problem. I mean, I'd stay after because I was just so bored.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, then, you're saying that whereas academically the Newton School was very fine—

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, the—

ROBERT BROWN: —this activity wasn't?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, not then. At least certainly not the art class I had, it was, I think, very limited.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm. Did you go from that into—to—

BARBARA SWAN: I went to Wellesley and thereby also hangs a tale that my father still having this doubt and reservations about art as a career and being a painter, you know, and—and, you know, how are you going to survive economically and also were you going to become bohemian and have some lifestyle that would be appalling, he insisted that I go to a four-year liberal arts college and I had always thought, you know, I'd go straight to art school and—but I was a good student, see. I mean, I got As and Bs and—and I enjoyed academic work. So I went along with his idea and I went to Wellesley College.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: And when I went to Wellesley College, I majored in Art History and there again I did it because I could see that the studio courses were really for dilettantes. They were not serious, you know, and I knew that I was going to go to art school after college. I mean, I was determined about that. I was simply postponing this art school experience, but Wellesley had a marvelous Art History Program. So, you know, in my judgment, if I was at Wellesley, the sensible thing was to take advantage of what was best and what was—you know, had the most to offer. So I loved—I actually adored the Art History, you know, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Who were some of the instrumental teachers?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, let's see. There's a Bernard Heyl. You know, he's now dead. He taught Baroque and we studied the Principles of Wolff's Law and—

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: —you know all that.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: Of course, you know that. And Focillon, Henri Focillon, which I thought life in forms of art, I thought that was very exciting. Let's see. Well, there was a man from Princeton came up as a guest lecturer and he was an authority on Oriental art and I think he's very famous and I can't for the life of me—if I saw his name, I'd recognize it.

Then Otto Benesch, and that was a tremendous thrill to me, gave us one term on Dürer and woodcuts before Dürer, concentrating on those in the Albertina Museum, and, of course, he was the curator of the Albertina. So, you know, I was just really enormously impressed that I was studying these things with the man who more or less was custodian of them, you know. That was—

ROBERT BROWN: And you had working collections out there at Wellesley then?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, sure. They had—they had a—they have a small museum.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: Nothing, you know—

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: I think it's improving all the time.

ROBERT BROWN: But you worked closely with objects then. Did you work with—

BARBARA SWAN: Yes. Yes, and then, you know, Wellesley has a—and I'm not sure if they continued this policy but they—they teach Art History along with a lab course and the lab course, if you're studying, say, Venetian painting, then you have to, in the lab, experiment with the technique of painting as the Venetians used it and if you're like doing something where there was Mosaic, you might, you know, try yourself to put a few pieces together as a Mosaic.

Now it seems to me like also in Gothic cathedrals we'd have to do a floor plan of a cathedral but—but as much as possible, they tried to have the Art History student have some tactile experience in the actual technique of whatever period and it's rather like a science lab, you know, where you say—

ROBERT BROWN: Was it effective?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I think it's effective for the person who's never going to be an artist. I think it gives them some sense of having experienced the materials, the feel of oil paint, glazes, you know, hacking away at—at—it would be soapstone, but, you know, at least the sense of chiseling of form 3-dimensionally.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: I was, from my point of view, bored a little bit because—

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: —it was not—because, you see, you know why it bothered me? There was no—it was not creative. I mean, it wasn't that I was expressing or—or that I was doing anything that was—I was simply just working with material in—in an—on an assignment and—and I—I do remember doing a wood cut which had to be in the style of 14th Century German and—and I had to do a head of a religious figure or—and it had to be with the feeling of that period and I was terribly pleased that Mr. Benesch thought that mine was really very convincing. But, you know, you can understand why I just was holding back on—

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: —and this was marking time.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, this didn't really—couldn't really rise above the level of doing pastiches, could it?

BARBARA SWAN: Right. That's right.

ROBERT BROWN: At best, you achieved a semblance, as you said.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah, yeah. And I think—don't you think—I'm sure, you know, you've had experience with college art programs now and I think that now they try to perhaps maybe have some of this but also give the student perhaps even more sense of their own self-expression.

ROBERT BROWN: And there wasn't much there then? You said there—

BARBARA SWAN: Well, they had other courses.

ROBERT BROWN: —were other courses.

BARBARA SWAN: They had other courses and I may have taken one or two. I took enough because, you know, I made my presence felt as an artist or budding artist but I didn't take all of them and because I—I didn't want to—I'd rather use my credits in—in Art History. I thought it was more valuable to me.

ROBERT BROWN: What did you think you might be able to do with Art History?

BARBARA SWAN: Well—

ROBERT BROWN: Why did you think of it in those terms?

BARBARA SWAN: —I—I was always thinking that—that if I had to teach, this was valuable, you know, and I knew that I probably would end up having to teach, you know, and if I had this double-barreled, you know, thing I could offer, that I could teach painting and Art History, this would put me in—and it actually was advantageous.

ROBERT BROWN: Sure. Well, did you find as a budding artist you were a bit frustrated by having to do all these various techniques? Had you sort of in mind the kind of materials you wished to work with?

BARBARA SWAN: Oh, I wasn't—no, I hadn't gotten that far. In fact, I—I—I kind of had fun trying but except that I—that, you know, it was frustrating in that if you did enjoy one of those little assignments, the next week you were off doing something else. You know, you never carried it any further and it was dilettantism, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, yeah. Well, then, out of Wellesley, you felt you got a certain kind of background—

BARBARA SWAN: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —and capability but you hadn't really gotten to where you wanted to be?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, no, no, and when I was at Wellesley, I earned money because the first two years I commuted because my father being a schoolteacher was, you know, rather strapped for funds and then the second, the junior and senior years, I did live at the college and I had a very flourishing business doing pastel portraits of my—anybody, you know, and before Christmas, I was running like a business where I had appointments for sittings in my dormitory room and—and I was knocking off these pastels and there was a framer in Newton Corner who, if you can believe it, with prices now, would frame them for \$3.98 and this was glass and—and, you know, wood around and—and then they would be shipped and—and, oh, some of mine went to California. In fact, I'm kind of embarrassed, I think, you know, where these, you know, portraits may be.

ROBERT BROWN: Return to haunt you?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, yes, because, you know, there are all kind of—you know, but, you know, you made everybody look kind of pretty and the pastel, you know, is very, you know—I've never used pastel since, you know, you know. But, anyway, I charged \$15. This was my fee.

ROBERT BROWN: My!

BARBARA SWAN: \$15, yes. I thought, you know, that anybody who can afford that, you know, I first thought maybe that was a little expensive, you know, but I didn't—I had plenty of customers.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you go directly to the Museum School when you graduated from Wellesley?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I applied, first of all, to the Art Students League and because I thought that I'd like to be in New York which seemed like an adventurous place to be but I needed some scholarship help because I'd have to live there and I applied for some kind of a scholarship and I was rejected. So I was kind of heartbroken about that and the next thing was to go to the Boston Museum School and live at home and I enrolled and I think I had a summer job and I think I was able to pay my own tuition.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm. When was this?

BARBARA SWAN: It would be—well, I graduated from Wellesley in 1943.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: So I entered the Museum School '44 and I, to my great pleasure, I—after that first semester, I never had to pay another bit of tuition. They—they had a very bountiful scholarship policy and I just coasted along.

ROBERT BROWN: Wow!

BARBARA SWAN: It was lovely.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, what level did you come in on into the Museum School?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I went in as a freshman.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

BARBARA SWAN: And as a result, I got an enormous amount out of that first year and I was always very impressed and—and it made me feel grateful that I had gone four years to Wellesley because I think I was rather immature and I would much rather have my growing pains and my social immaturity kind of, you know, in the safety of Wellesley's all-girl, you know, where you could kind of be lost and—and, you know, all your little hang-ups didn't exactly interfere with anything, but by the time I—I went to the Museum School, I was very sure, much more sure of myself. I—you know, a measure of self-confidence, especially since I had gotten all As in Art History and—and had done my general exam at the end of the four years was privately told to me by—that it was Honors, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: And—and—and this was very thrilling to me and I have, you know, a measure of self-confidence, but also having done well in Art History, I had much more insight into the nature of art and I realized that a great deal of what I'd done up till then was real crap and I realized that I had really no sense of structure, that I could do these faces and they'd look like the person but as far as the bone structure or the sense of volume, they were—it was missing, and I think—so I had grown up to the point that I knew what I didn't know and—and had a sense of my shortcomings and I—so I went to the first level drawing class as a freshman and where the first assignment was to do simply spheres, cones, cylinders, and I simply devoured that assignment because I saw the essence of it. This is what I didn't really understand fully and that I didn't, you know, have this sense of structure and volume and—and I, you know, really applied myself.

Now I know that there were students coming directly from high school who in a sense had the world by the tail. You know, they'd been very much, you know, favored and they sort of



felt they were hot shots and they just knew everything and for them, this assignment was incomprehensible. I mean, you know, why are they—why do I have to do a sphere, you know, something so basic when I'm already into, you know, much more ambitious things?

ROBERT BROWN: But you found the structure was lacking before, even rather superficial?

BARBARA SWAN: I thought so. Yeah. I thought so. I—I had this sense that—that this was something I needed very much and my things—you know, I got away with an awful lot because I could get this quick likeness, but I had a feeling that there was this certain facility and a certain superficiality of surface and—and I—I think that—that, you know, studying and, you know, coming even down to Cézanne and realizing his problems and in this Art History course on Contemporary—they called it Modern Art then, that this gave me a revelation, you know.

See, I was intellectually able to understand what these artists and what a Botticelli head or—or the fantastic volume in a Rubens' head and—and I just was intelligent enough to know that this was something I needed an awful lot more of work at. I just needed to work at it.

ROBERT BROWN: And by going first into the simple geometric—

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, this was the freshman assignment and—and—and I think that I got much more out of that first year of art school than a lot of other people because I sensed its value and—and it was—and it was meaningful to me. I wanted to work hard at it and—and I did work hard.

ROBERT BROWN: What was the teaching like? Were you left on your own a lot?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, no. The teaching was—was very—I mean, I think that I went to the Museum School in its golden age and there are many reasons for that because I understand now that, you know, these classes are crowded. I've heard where you can go for two months and never see the teacher because there's so many people and they don't ever quite get to you and unless you're aggressive about it, you can just be totally ignored.

Our class was small. We had a great deal of individual attention. Now the other thing which I found was marvelous for me, that there were other students like me who had had to wait, had had to postpone their art training because mine was postponed because I went four years to college, the others were G.I.s from the G.I. Bill, and Ellsworth Kelly is one of those, you see.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: And there are these young men coming back and they'd had to put time in World War II and they had the same sense of dedication and serious commitment that I felt and I think that my relationship with those, I think you learned more in a sense from your fellow students and their attitudes than—than your teacher because what you see them doing and what you see them finding important is—is meaningful to you.

ROBERT BROWN: What kind of things did you share with some of these fellow mature students?

BARBARA SWAN: Well—well, it's simply that—that—that you worked terribly hard. Now I remember—it's hard to—I mean, I could give you a rundown, like the names of artists that were in school with me. David Aronson, now I don't think he was in the War but he was highly-committed and he had this fantastic facility. Of course, Ellsworth Kelly is probably the most famous, you know—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

BARBARA SWAN: —of any that—that—and I remember seeing him in the corridor still wearing his G.I. fatigues, you know, and looking bewildered, you know, you know, but very quiet, the way he is.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: And—and it's just that—that Reed Kay, who is now—teaches painting at Boston University, he was a G.I. that came back and Jason Berger, who's an artist in this area, also, and I'm not sure whether Jason was—I don't think he was a G.I. somewhere—

somewhere, but he and Reed were very close friends and still are and I remember them setting up an extraordinarily ambitious still life. They had every conceivable object. They had clocks, vases, and it was like a huge pile of—of—of, you know, stuff and they had huge, to my way, you know, big canvases and the two of them, you know, undertook this on their own. You see, the attitude being that these guys just, you know, were—were totally involved and it wasn't this kind of kid-like attitude that, well, you know, you just do your assignment and then you goof off.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

BARBARA SWAN: You know.

ROBERT BROWN: They worked at it till they got—

BARBARA SWAN: They were working on—

ROBERT BROWN: —the problem solved?

BARBARA SWAN: —it but not only that, the setting of themselves up, situations of real challenge beyond what might ever be assigned.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: I mean, you know, you might be assigned a still life. So, you know, you put two or three things in and—but—but not them. They—you know, they made a combination which ended up that I had the same sense and I did a huge still life myself with furniture and—and, oh, I don't know what all in it and—and worked weeks and weeks on it, you know, and it was, you know, I'm not—it's still hanging in my mother's house. It's perhaps one of the things they liked the best I've ever done because everything was done lovingly, you know. Every object was, you know—

ROBERT BROWN: Were you encouraged to carry things on like that?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, and our painting teacher was Karl Zerbe, who's, you know, recently died, and he—he was marvelous in—in his, you know—the use of techniques. He—he was very much involved with understanding Old Master techniques of oil, oil and glazes and building up surface, building up textures. He himself became allergic, I believe, to oil and had to move into encaustic. So as a result, number of students became interested in encaustic and David Aronson did a number of large things in encaustic because of Zerbe's having made this discovery himself and also it's very permanent, as we know from those Egyptian funeral portraits.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, yes. And did you do—begin to do that sort of thing?

BARBARA SWAN: I never did. It was too much like cooking. The whole thing scared me. I never tried encaustic. You know, I had enough problems with oil and I still do, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, you've never liked—I gather from Wellesley, too, you don't like these involved preparations.

BARBARA SWAN: No, I know. You're absolutely right. You know, and you have to—like there's a guy, Dick Boyce, and he's quite, you know, a well-known artist now on the West Coast. He lives in Los Angeles, and he loved this sort of thing, you know, and he would grind his own paints even, you see, and get the empty tubes and put it in and he—oh, and then the whole idea of melting rabbit skin glue over the burner and stirring it and then putting your own whiting and making your own gesso, I mean, all of this was very much encouraged and I must say that I did do it to a degree but it wasn't my nature. I think—

ROBERT BROWN: What impact do you think it's had on the fellow students later because they did do these very laborious—

BARBARA SWAN: Well, Reed Kay, of course, has written a book. I mean, he's written a book on—on Old Master—on techniques and in a sense he's carrying on the tradition of Doerner, Max—I think it's Max Doerner and Mayer, those—*The Artist Handbook*, I think that's called.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: And—and he—I'm sure that no matter how—you know, of course, now in art present age, we're very avant garde and we have plastics to deal with and the whole—all of the ingredients that are now changing and developing, but—but there's still always going to be a curiosity about how Rembrandt might have been painted or—and artists from time to time can always go back to those old techniques and bringing with it their own vision.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: And sometimes those techniques can become a valuable tool if it's appropriate to your kind of vision.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm. You think it was to some of the visions of your contemporaries?

BARBARA SWAN: Well—well, you were speaking about the ones that went to school with me or are you speaking today?

ROBERT BROWN: Well, even generally, though I think mainly of those that you went to school with.

BARBARA SWAN: Well, of course, Reed's an example of where it really it became a total commitment.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

BARBARA SWAN: I mean, he—in fact, he's almost, for my money, a little too fussy about these things because I think it inhibits if you become too involved. I think it's sometimes you have to just, you know, let it out, paint and not give a damn, you know, and just—

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: The—let's see. David Aronson, of course, has always been involved with encaustic and glazing and he's very much—you know, it's Old Master-like in his approach and then, of course, recently he's gone into bronze-casting and so he's off in another tangent.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: But again, it's materials and—and what materials can do to enhance his particular vision.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: Ellsworth Kelly, in a funny way, he does these, you know, hard-edged things but they are meticulously done. I have a friend who's one of—Kelly. We all call him Kelly. One of Kelly's best friends and he visits Kelly and he's very much aware of what Kelly's doing now and how he does it and he—he builds up coats and coats of those solid reds. They are beautifully meticulously built up. It is not—and I think they'll be in oil, you see, and whereas artists using acrylic, you see, will—will get a kind of an immediate solid color because it will dry flat and it's solid and—but with oil, it's definitely enhanced, I think, by—by many coats done beautifully.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: And Kelly has this perfectionism of the surface and what it has to be and I'm—and I know he got that from our training and also Kelly draws beautifully and I think one has to give him—admire him for that and I think oftentimes you think that the hard-edged totally minimal abstract, you know, will—you know, they can't draw.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: But Ellsworth, in art class, drew beautifully.

ROBERT BROWN: Is he exceptional in moving away from representationalism?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, he even then was—was very different from other students and he had come in from—he lived in New Jersey and he somehow just—I don't know how he happened to choose the Boston Museum School because most of the other students, you

see, were from Boston and there's a whole nucleus of—of students who admired Hyman Bloom and Jack Levine and this is this whole Lithuanian Jewish syndrome and that has its origin and its roots—there's Chagall [ph], but then there's Soutine—

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: —and it's—and, you see, that—that whole—and I find that fascinating to pursue, if anyone, were historic—the fact that—that Hyman Bloom and—and Levine in Boston whose parents, I think, came from Lithuania, yet in their vision and they weren't—they've never lived in Lithuania, they never, you know,—I don't think they've ever been back in any sense. So there's no cultural thing in the sense that they were in that country and no cultural thing, but isn't it interesting that Soutine in Paris, also a Lithuanian, should—should—that there should be this relationship in their vision?

ROBERT BROWN: Yes. Well, this—what did Zerbe bring as a teacher?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, Zerbe, see, now Zerbe had—

ROBERT BROWN: Did he complement that?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, because Zerbe was German and he brought—well, what's really fun is when you do—because, you know, we all took him for granted when we were students and he was kind of, to me, rather dashing and, you know, he had a kind of European charm, you know, and I was really very awed and—and, you know, I thought he was God in a way, you know. So my—my detached—I mean, you know, you're not as detached when you're female and young and there's this sort of, you know, European charming man who's leaning over to tell you what's wrong with your painting, you know. You're always a little bit stirred by his presence, you know, but about three years ago, at Yale University, there was a show of German painting, 19th Century German painting, and we—we were—Bernard Chaet, of course, who was also a classmate of mine, and he's teaching, a professor at Yale, and he's another example where, you know, technique in the uses of paint and texture are very important, but he says you've got to come down and see this German show and we went down to see it and he says because you'll—it'll be such a revelation because you'll understand Zerbe's sources. You see, we saw 19th Century German artists who Zerbe had perhaps briefly mentioned but he never made any point because we being Americans had never even see these artists—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

BARBARA SWAN: —and yet these were the artists who—who were his influence and they had the same kind of paint technique and also I—the kind of way he taught us to paint, he was not the colorist. It was chiaroscuro. You got your form from going from light to dark and you could use an umber and you just go from light umber to dark umber. He never—I—I feel that was one thing that we lacked was—was this color sense which Joseph Albers gave to his Yale students. It's fantastic theory and science of color which I feel I missed, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: And I sort of solved my color problems on my own later and I think other artists have solved and certainly Ellsworth, you know, that was never a problem but I think David Aronson still doesn't use color. He still uses color in the sense that Zerbe, you know, wanted us to use this—this kind of chiaroscuro.

ROBERT BROWN: Fairly limited palette?

BARBARA SWAN: Very limited and—and the flesh tones being sort of just, you know, opalescent tans and—but—but not—not using the problems of intensity versus neutral or—or, you know, that—that relationship which became so much a part of the modern and contemporary art and it's that kind of color of—of, you know, really intense use of color in relationship of very subtle relationships which Albers taught and I think that Bernard Chaet has a beautiful sense of color and I think he picked up a great deal from having been associated with Albers at Yale, although he's not in any way Albers school of thought and yet Albers hired him which I find interesting.

Albers was the one who hired Bernard Chaet because he saw in Bernard Chaet's background something that perhaps would be complementary to what he was teaching, I would assume.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm. Well, what do you think was an additional strength of Zerbe's teaching, aside from technique? Was there an outlook on art or anything of the sort?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, he—he loved Max Beckman and Max Beckman came and spoke and that was, you know, unforgettable and what was a great thrill for me, having, you know, seen Max Beckman and when he spoke, he did not speak English, so his wife, who's a lovely woman, stood beside him and read his speech in English and he could have just sat, you know, in back because she was reading his speech but because it was his speech, he stood up and stood next to her and it was as if he were on the podium but she was reading the speech. You know, wasn't that sort of sweet, I thought? And—and years later, when my husband opened his art gallery, the first year he had this fantastic idea, he says wouldn't it be terrific to have a Max Beckman show and he went down—Catherine Viviano was representing Max Beckman's estate and—and he thought it would perhaps be impossible and yet he—he met Mrs. Beckman, the widow, and she thought it was a lovely idea and—and she came up for the opening and we had a marvelous party for her and—and so, you know, this sort of feeling for Beckman that I had as a student, it was very thrilling to be able to be part of a show of his work, you see.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, yes. What was it that drew you to him at that time?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, what drew me to him was—was Zerbe's enthusiasm. Naturally, as a student you reflect your teacher's—

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: —enthusiasms and—and—and Zerbe was very involved in this kind of painting that—that Beckman represents where there's a certain symbolism and an allegorical quality and those huge triptychs, you know, have—and Zerbe obviously was very—and they probably meant a great deal to Zerbe being German himself, you see, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: —then—then another artist that was invited was Philip Guston and he spoke to us and he, of course, then was painting quite realistically and he was also involved in figurative, very elaborate figurative compositions and maybe slightly allegorical and in a sense like Beckman but he gave us a talk on Piero della Francesca which was very moving and made us realize this infinite structure and—and monumentality that's in Piero is very similar to the monumentality sought out in Beckman and I think there's emphasis on large-scale monumental, you know, wall pieces, paintings which have some kind of message of man's state, you know, and it was—it's a humanist. It's a humanist approach, very different to, you know, now where you do stripes and—and—

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: —a color field.

ROBERT BROWN: At that time, was there anything that would seem to be a rebellion against?

BARBARA SWAN: What—you know, what we were rebelling against—

ROBERT BROWN: Were you rebelling against something then?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I couldn't stand Rockport and I still can't stand these corny landscapes, you know, the picturesque, you know, and—and, I mean, we were very opposed to the pretty landscapes and I think that we were also—didn't like that kind of painting which is now being resurrected which is Edmund Tarbell and certain of the 19th—late 19th Century very realistically-rendered lovingly things of—of peonies in a Chinese pot, you know, that kind of aesthetics.

ROBERT BROWN: Right.

BARBARA SWAN: Which I suppose now is where we're considering, you see.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes. Could you admire then its technique?

BARBARA SWAN: I thought it was insufferably sentimental and—and slightly corny. I did—

but I think I could see that they were beautifully rendered and that there was a sense but—but, you see, I had this sense that you had to have—that painting was more—was more than just that kind of—you know, that you had to have some kind of human—the sense of man and—and his fate and relationships of human figures.

The funny thing is that now I'm painting bottles and I think that—

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: —if I looked at an Edmund Tarbell, I'd probably be rather much more impressed.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm. Wow! This is June 18th, 1973, a second session. Give me your voice.

BARBARA SWAN: Oh, yeah. Well, second session with Barbara Swan.

ROBERT BROWN: All right. The last time you were talking about your days at the Museum School and you said something about the great importance to you of visits by Philip Guston and the widow, well, Max Beckman and later his widow, meeting her, and then you were giving something of your opinion of the Boston School, people like Tarbell, and their sort of later followers in places like Rockport.

When you came out of the Museum School, what did you think you wanted to be? What was your aim? Had you a style?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes. Well, that's a very good question and I think that one can pick up a thread in something else that I said in the previous interview which was that I had this unusual knack for getting a likeness and which indicates that my previous preoccupation had always been with the human figure and I think I could safely say that I never was and never have been a landscape painter and it's a sense of—of—of man, figurative drawing, you know, I considered enormous challenge and something which requires great discipline and draftsmanship, you see, was of paramount importance to me and if I could slightly digress, I do think that drawing in the sense that I was taught drawing could in some ways be a dying art and I could even feel myself in some ways an anachronism because of the way I see drawing and the way I was trained to draw, the way that Rubens or Watteau or the consummate draftsman like Degas, you see, this can be trained, can be taught, but it requires enormous discipline and I sometimes think younger artists can go to art school, determined to be into stripes and hard-edged works, and—and totally bypass this kind of training which, from my point of view, is—is a loss because I think it's a—and if—if this isn't carried down and there isn't this training, it's a whole way of seeing a whole discipline of the eye related to the skill of the hand that I think is a beautiful form of art.

Beautiful drawing to me is—is very exciting. Now so with this sense of drawing which I adored and—and I—and I really like to regard myself as a draftsman, you know, that this is something that I take pride in—in doing well, this—and also the sense of the human figure, I'm very interested in the psychology of the human face and—and I might add that I do not—on rare occasions I've done commissioned portraits but you get into very deep hot water doing commissioned portraits if you don't understand the person's own fantasies or their own vanities but to paint or draw my friends, you know, my fellow artists where I can explore something about them, say something on my terms and with another artist, there's no vanity, they're just as interested as you in—in either a subjective or a searching kind of character study.

ROBERT BROWN: They discover themselves possibly—

BARBARA SWAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —through what you discover?

BARBARA SWAN: And they're—they're intrigued and—and they're very sympathetic models, you know, because they—they—they sit on—on your terms because, as artists themselves, they understand what—what I might be trying for, whereas you get a commission from a lady who's pushing 50 who wants to look like something out of Gainsborough, you're in big trouble.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

BARBARA SWAN: And—

ROBERT BROWN: And you've discovered that could happen?

BARBARA SWAN: Oh, I have. Yes, I've had—I have had a horrendous experience. Once I did a lady and she sat for me, you know, two or three times and she wanted to wait for the summer and I more or less finished the painting on my own and I remember that the painting was delivered to Boris Mirski, who was my dealer. Boris thought it looked just like her and he put it down in his basement and he said to the lady as she was coming in, he says you're going to love this picture, it's—it's, you know, just—looks just like you. The poor lady went down, took one look, burst into tears, absolutely fell apart, I mean had a total emotional breakdown, went blindly out into the street, and for the rest of the afternoon her husband could not locate her. I think he found her at some point in a bar and—and she was—she really had a—a traumatic experience looking at my portrait and it was because her fantasy of what she thought she should look like and—and the appalling thing to her was to have somebody say it looks just like you and—and—but it was startling to me the degree to which this woman was so vulnerable because in her own character she was a high-powered aggressive female. She had been president of Hadassah. She ran a theater group somewhere. She was very much a doer, a positive and affirmative person, and for her to have this crack-up on how she thought she should look, I found really rather revealing, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: You don't like to go through such things?

BARBARA SWAN: Hardly. As a matter of fact, I never even, you know, charged her. I simply took the portrait and did a still life over it. I mean, why should I? I wouldn't want a painting of mine in a house where there was that reaction and—but—but it's made me very wary. I mean, I do not paint people unless—the best people to paint are art collectors and I've had marvelous experiences where an art collector knows my work, respects it, and he says I'd love to have something of yours but would you mind if my daughter or my wife is the model and—and, you know, then it becomes a family portrait and it's a good painting. They want a good painting but incidentally with a member of the family as the subject. Then you—then you have a lovely experience.

ROBERT BROWN: Because these are people who understand that you're going to explore them?

BARBARA SWAN: Right, right.

ROBERT BROWN: And you think the drawing and training in drawing aids you at getting at the core of—

BARBARA SWAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —people and their make-up?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, but, you see, I'm—when I do a portrait, you see, you sometimes have psychological insights that even you're not aware of and—and I've done—all my life I've drawn people. See, when I had my two-year fellowship to Europe and I was on the boat going over, I was drawing all the time people and in Paris, I was doing—I disciplined myself in Paris to do just line in the sense that Matisse, you know, and you don't turn back. You put that line down and you leave it and I remember drawing Ellsworth Kelly in this pure line and, you know, I can show it to you later, and then Kelly drew me, you see, and his has a different quality of line but—but the two artists drawing each other was great fun because we both were working towards something and we used each other as a model and it wasn't necessary that Kelly was trying to make me look like myself. I think mine's more of a likeness of him than his of me but maybe there's something of me.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, now drawing, you think of as a separate art form or do you think of as a stage door painting?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, yeah, that's a good question because if you're doing—of course, my portrait drawings often are things in themselves and—and the portrait drawing as such is—is a final statement. It's certainly not preparatory to a painting but sometimes you do a

painting and—and you use the drawing but I think the portrait drawing per se can hold up and often be a more spontaneous and direct reflection of the person. Sometimes in a painting, if they tend to get overworked and—and, you know, something can go dead on you. Then drawing as such, I think, went through changes in my lifetime. I think that certainly there's a period where, you know, you considered drawing as—as preliminary to a painting but then with an artist like Leonard Baskin, the drawing became a thing in itself, a large meal in itself, and Baskin would get these huge sheets of paper, you know, double elephant watercolor paper and—and monumental figures and—and his drawings would hold the wall and—and were really, you know, kind of impressive image, completely self-contained as a drawing, and I think a number of us artists were probably influenced by him in—in assuming that drawing then could become the equivalent of a painting.

ROBERT BROWN: When was this that you would have come under his influence?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, in the '50s, in the '50s, I—I knew him and—

ROBERT BROWN: You did some big things yourself?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, I did some large—and I would do drawings. I changed my style in that before in Paris I was trying pure line and the simplicity of pure line. Then I got kind of influenced by Baskin in the sense that we'd go out to visit him in Northampton and—and he had this fantastic knowledge of handmade paper, you know, Italian and French and English, and this, you know, was very awesome to me and the fact that these papers could make such a difference and—and Baskin, I think, got into that through his print-making and—and he, you know, has this great sense of—of, you know, beautiful materials and he's a very acquisitive collector himself of—of Old Master and early books on incunabula and all of that. He has this tremendous knowledge of—of ancient materials and when I saw the possibilities, then I gave up my pure line drawings and began working more with wash and, you know, wetting the paper and getting a variety of line and more textured kind of drawing and the drawings became involved with figures but the psychological relationship in—in—not in terms of likeness or portrait but just a father-child or two profiles interlocking which gave a sense of—of man—man-woman relationship in a sort of confrontation where there's intimacy but each person still is totally separate within his own identity and—and so I had a period, in fact, in my work where I didn't paint much at all. I simply was drawing all the time and—

ROBERT BROWN: This was the 1950s?

BARBARA SWAN: In the '50s, yes, and I had—I think I had shows of just drawings. I think I had a show with Arthur Polonsky and—and one other artist whom I can't remember. The three of us, it might have been Bernard Chaet, the three of us had a three-person drawing show and—and I think that in the '50s, there was a fantastic interest in drawings and there were collectors who—who collected just drawings and—and where color was not of that much significance and—

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm. Well, in your career, did this really get triggered by when you left art school and when you went to France? You went immediately to France?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, I did.

ROBERT BROWN: And is that when you really began working at drawing?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes. I—I—well, for one thing, you take, you know, sketch pads and it's easier to carry that around and—and to do drawings than it is to—I would—I had my oil paints and I'd set up an easel if I was going to stay permanently and I was permanently in the South of France two winters and I did paint. I did paint in—in the South of France and I look back on those paintings as not entirely successful and I think it's this whole business of being disrupted and—and changing your environment and there I was in the brilliant sun of the South of France and—and all I could think of was Matisse and so I would try to use very bright colors and—and naturally I did not have the experience or the innate sense of color of Matisse and I—I think some of the paintings, you know, came off as rather garish and—and my color sense in Boston had always been very much neutral, you know, grays or very, you know, somber tonalities and—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, the teaching at the school—

BARBARA SWAN: Yes.



ROBERT BROWN: —encouraged that.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, very much so, very much so, you know, rather dark chiaroscuro. That was my impression, and—

ROBERT BROWN: But you carried this color sense then from France. How did you work toward it?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes. Well, the—the only painting that I think came off was the one that I showed you around the corner, my self-portrait, where—where I managed to use the color of the Mediterranean in the background. See, the Mediterranean is a wonderful blue-green and—but that painting is a very subjective painting and—and I did it in the South of France having traveled and—and, finally, I settled back and—and there was the sheer joy of painting again and I hadn't painted for, you know, a couple of months maybe and I just, in a burst of joy, did this painting and—and it has this sort of private thing in that—in that I had met the gentleman who's now my husband and—and as I said, I, you know, consider it a romantic painting, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, you—you see yourself in that painting and within a rather limited tonal range?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, very limited and—and—but I was able to—but if you looked at the tonality of the face, it's still in a very neutral kind of color and—and—but I—but I was able to use the Mediterranean in the background and—

ROBERT BROWN: You weren't then ready to see a person in full flesh, full robust range of colors?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I—I would paint but I—I—you know, it still was—I did—I did some very bright things, you know. When you painted somebody outdoors, there's this glaring sun and—but I think it's very hard to control if you're not used to it, you know, and I wasn't sure that—and I had these paintings that my family have hanging in their house still and some parts of the paintings I like and—but, you know, it was not totally my identity and I—and I think you have to think in terms of your own roots and your own background and here I was Bostonian, you know, suddenly thrust into the brilliant sun of France and it would have been, I think, very difficult for me to suddenly turn into a French painter as such.

ROBERT BROWN: You have mentioned now the climate of France. What of the human and psychological climate during your two years there on your fellowship?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I—

ROBERT BROWN: Describe a bit what you—your—being new and an ingénue while you were there.

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I had—I mean, it was, you know, tremendous experience for me and I'll tell you why. First of all, the two summers before I went, I was at the McDowell Colony and I met a number of composers, writers, not so many artists, for some reason painters were in short supply up there, but now the composers, I became rather more close to the composers as friends because I, also through—I shared a studio at the McDowell Colony. It was a building that had two sides and one side had Claudio Spies, who's a composer from Chile, and he's now, I think this next year, going to be chairman of the Music Department at Princeton, and he was very much a disciple of Stravinsky and a highly-cultivated and, you know, very charming and—and delightful young man, and when he met me, he says, you know, I have a friend that you've simply got to meet because I think you have a lot in common and it was Luise Vosgerchian.

Now Luise has gone on in her way. She's a brilliant concert pianist but now she's a full professor at Harvard in Music and is one of the few women, you know, in Harvard. She's been teaching at Harvard all along but they finally have paid proper homage—

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: —and—but Luise is very colorful, Armenian, you know, lively, volatile, and she had a fellowship to Europe when I did. I think hers was from Harvard, and the two of us set off together to Europe and I think we were kind of an interesting pair and I always say we

went through Europe single file because Luise was charging ahead and I, the day dreamer, was looking in store windows and trying to catch up to Luise. I mean, we never really—I can't believe that we were side by side very often because she was one who was very quick moving and—and I'm just, you know, a dreamer.

Well, we—we got into Paris together and through Luise, through my association with composers and because many artist friends, when I won the two-year Albert Whiten Fellowship, Arthur Polonsky had won a fellowship, Richard Boyce had won a fellowship, Bernard Chaet got to Europe on some other kind of a grant, it was incredible the number of artists and composers who, during the two years, also descended upon Europe with grants and this was because of the World War II. A lot of money had been stashed away, could not be used during the War, and there was a flood of it suddenly and all these gifted young people were given grants, more than would ever have been given before or since within a given period because it was a backlog that they were dealing with.

ROBERT BROWN: And these were all people who'd gone through art school and were—

BARBARA SWAN: Yes. They were—they were—and they were composers who had been at Harvard, had done graduate work and were most of them studying with Nadia Boulanger. These were all Boulanger protégées, and—but can you imagine the climate for me, you see?

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: And—and having been an only child and there is this sense of parents perhaps wanting to protect and not even wanting to depart with—with you, I think, you know, my mother, I can remember the boat and there she was in tears on the dock seeing me off, you see, but—but—but my sheer good fortune, you know, being all alone, to tumble into this really fantastic community of mostly young men, all of whom were gifted, lively, and they settled in different parts of Europe and it was such that I could travel to Florence and there was Bob Middleton who's now a composer teaching at Vassar, who had an apartment and—and he immediately threw a party and I was, saw and met people from Florence and the natives that I wouldn't have known, and then when I went to Naples, there was Douglas Allanbrook, who teaches in, I think, a college in Annapolis, St. John's or Johns, I don't know what it's called, and he's had operas done, and he—he took me down to Positano and—and I—and then we went over to Capri and—but I always had a companion. I always had somebody that I could look up who would show me and we'd have a good time.

Then in Paris, there was Luise and—and Arthur. He had a wonderful studio place and, you know, which I'm sure he would describe for you.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: But—but I never was lonely, you know. It was just—just—

ROBERT BROWN: Were you at all under—was there anybody you were supposed to touch base with, a teacher or—

BARBARA SWAN: No, no. That was the lovely thing. My friend Luise had to study with Boulanger and I had a fellowship which was to travel and to paint and this Mr. Whiten, who gave the money, I think, was straight out of Henry James. He was from a textile manufacturing family in Whitensville, Massachusetts, I guess he's named for that family, and he went to Europe at an early age and he lived the grand life and—but in his bequest, his thoughts turned back to Boston and he left this large sum and in the bequest he recommends that the recipient see certain things. He put down, you know, Chartres and Prado and the National Gallery and he—he wanted to reach out through the years to whatever young student had this grant so that they would realize that he was concerned about what they used the money and what they'd see and that they followed the things which had given him such pleasure.

ROBERT BROWN: So as far as you were concerned, these were most happy times then?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, yes, and you know why they were happy to this degree? In—in December, I was in, you know, a cheap hotel and it became apparent to me that the French idea of central heating was limited and I'd be painting and my hands were turning blue with cold and—and it was around this time that I met Alan Fink, who—who's since become my husband, and he—we were all eating in a restaurant on the Left Bank and I'll have to very

quickly tell you that story because he—Luise and I had been in this restaurant for weeks and we were the only Americans and we felt very possessive and we felt we'd gone native and that we were off the beaten tourist track and we, you know, felt very sort of smug about our little restaurant and one dreadful day there were these three young men, obviously American, came in to this restaurant and Luise decided, well, we'll have nothing to do with them and they're just tourists and it's a terrible error. I don't know how they found this place but I'm sure they'll go away. Well, they didn't go away and every lunch and every supper there they were. We still didn't speak to them because they would sit at their table and we'd be at another table.

And it became apparent that these young men must be in a hotel in the area and if they were tourists, they were taking their time about going on to another country. Finally, the restaurant became very crowded one day, oh, and I have to also—I think another amusing thing is that Luise being a musician had an ear for inflection and although we weren't, you know, speaking she could overhear them talking and she once turned to me and she says, you know, she says, they're not only Americans but they're Midwest and, well, that was beyond, you know, Midwest, I mean, really that was just, you know, how could one be so uncouth, you know.

Finally, we had to sit with them because the restaurant got crowded and so we had a conversation. Well, Luise and I had to immediately reconsider all our past opinions because it turned out they'd been to a Beethoven concert the night before and they had a copy of *Cette Semaine*, which is a weekly program of events in Paris, and they were going to the ballet or some other cultural event that night and they were polite enough to say, you know, would we like to go along and at that point we rather quickly re-evaluated the situation and said, yes, we thought we would, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: —and, of course, it made—as you know, I married one of them.

ROBERT BROWN: What were they doing there? Touring?

BARBARA SWAN: Touring.

ROBERT BROWN: Seriously?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, they were—one of the boys was in—in pre-med and he was affiliated with a hospital and he has since—is now an analyst on the West Coast. He's a psychiatrist. And my husband-to-be had been working as an accountant and got so fed up that I think, according to his version, one day he threw all the invoices into the air and—and left and never went back and decided to just take some money he'd saved and go to Europe and just see what would happen. So his—his was simply searching for some kind of identity.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: And the other fellow had some sort of grant which I think was a little bit of a put-on because you're supposed to do a paper and—and I don't think he ever did write the paper and somehow he conned somebody into a little money and got to Europe but I'm not sure whatever it was he was trying to do.

ROBERT BROWN: This was all in Paris. Then you left—

BARBARA SWAN: Well, then you see—

ROBERT BROWN: —settled in the South—

BARBARA SWAN: Well, what happened was that—that this—it got so cold and these three young men were going to go to the South and I—another one of my gentleman friends had—oh, lots of gentleman friends and that's why, like when I do the Friends of the Artists, I always—it's men. I mean, I have to face it. I mean, you know, men like to do women but, boy, I like doing men. I mean, they're much more fun.

But, anyway, we—we had—my friend Ralph Coburn and Ralph Coburn is now a graphics designer for MIT and he also designs all the publications of my husband's gallery and Ralph was a painter and Ralph is a very close friend of Ellsworth Kelly and—and they very much

think in the same way.

Ralph had already settled himself in the South of France and in the process of talking in the restaurant, the three fellows from Chicago said, well, why should we all suffer with this cold, let's go to the South of France, and I remembered that Ralph was down there and I says, well, why don't we go to the town where Ralph is because he would then know how to help us find a place to live. So one fateful day we all got on that train and Luise had to stay home because she was stuck with Boulanger, but I was a free agent and Luise thought that I was going into some awfully sinful situation where I was going to be living with all these gentlemen which then—and I did end up—it was an odd thing.

Back in those days, it was in the early example of communal living, and what we got down, we went to Sanary-sur-Mere, a charming little French fishing village between Marseilles and Toulon, not the least bit fashionable, it wasn't the Riviera, and it was just somehow much more charming for us. Moise Kisling, the painter who had been a friend of Modigliani, was there living and we met him.

When we—when we arrived, we found a real estate agent who showed us the upper floor of a villa called Villa Volmere, which we all shared the rent and it had, you know, several bedrooms so we could all somehow have our own private place and we then shared the food and we shared the cooking and later I found out that this villa had been occupied by Thomas Mudd and Furtwangler and I think Alma Mahler may have lived there because in her memoirs she talks of Sonnery and these Germans would have all looked each other up or known each other. So I think it was—had a rather distinguished history of people that had—

ROBERT BROWN: Now it's a little commune of Americans living there.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, I think that the—I know the postman was very curious about us all, you know, and—and I did a drawing of the postman because he—he took a very leisurely attitude toward his mail and—and he'd come up and he'd sit for me for, you know, half an hour on his mail route and then he'd go and finish delivering his letters but one day he saw me carrying the—the groceries from the little town because it was my turn to carry them and I took my turn like everybody else and he thought that that was rather shocking, that I should be having this huge bundle with all these young men, and I says, well, you know, in America it's very democratic, you see. We all each does his and it's my turn. Well, he shook his head, he thought that this was dreadful.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, were these people—was it—what was it mainly, the setting, your colleagues, or your friends, the people in the South of France? Was anything triggering things off in you at this point?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I was, of course—the, you know, excitement of new experience, the excitement of—and I—and I was—I was painting in the South of France and I was doing drawings again of like my postman and we met some marvelous characters. For instance, we met Jack Bilbo, who was an anarchist, and—and, you know, you could use up your whole tape on—on Jack Bilbo. He was so extraordinary. And Kisling, we met and went to his studio. There was a fisherman who turned painter who did these marvelous little Mediterranean fish and—and the Duke of Windsor bought one of his paintings and his wife made great bouillabaisse and we became part of the community of the people in the town who were artistic, you know, what loved us and—and maybe other people disapproved of us but there was—it was a very sympathetic environment and I did a lot of paintings and drawings to the degree that the reporter from the Toulon newspaper came and did an interview and it was shortly before I was to leave but he began—the headline said, "Barbara Swan *decouvrir son lumiere*, has discovered the light", and from then on, he wrote the most rapturous glowing descriptions about me with my hair blowing in the wind and that I had—oh, yes, it is. What—what the young man said in the interview was I had hardly passed 23 spring times which was a lovely way to guess at my age and my friend Ralph Coburn reading that, he said, but what about those winters? Leave me in my place.

But it was—it was a charming article and I got fan letters, you know. Gentlemen from all over that coastal area inviting me or propositioning me to God knows what, one man wanted me to come and see his Watteaus and a few other things and another had a restaurant in Lehre, he wanted me to come and try his mead, which is a honey thing, and—and—and I—the whole thing made me rather shy and I was rather glad to be leaving because my feeling was why take them up on it because I preferred them to imagine me in some fantasy

because the reality might have been disappointing. So I never did that, you know, look up any of them but it was rather fun, you know, to get all that fan mail.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, this was a very happy time, though, as far as your work was going, too?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, yes, and I was doing great progress in the drawings and drawing all the time, you know, and in Paris, you know, I—Alan is a chess player and we'd go to a bar and if you ever want a model that's going to stay still, there's nothing like two people playing chess. They don't move, you know. So I was doing drawings all the time and lately I've gone through my drawings in Paris and in the South of France and some of the people that—there's a composer, Harry Somers, who I drew all the time because he was playing chess, and it turns out he's one of Canada's most distinguished contemporary composers and I'd love to, you know, palm off a drawing to some place in Canada where they might like this record of him.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, as many people as you've met have gone to some prominence in the arts. They come, though, with considerable education and promise.

BARBARA SWAN: Definitely.

ROBERT BROWN: At that time, also, there were still droves of people on the G.I. Bill, weren't they, some of them that had hardly a lesson?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I didn't have any contact with them because they probably would have been affiliated with the schools, see.

ROBERT BROWN: I see.

BARBARA SWAN: And I was with—and all my friends were—had similar grants where they were not committed to a school. They—they had—they had all matured to the point where they were working artists and their grants were buying time for them to build up a further body of work in order to achieve some kind of distinction.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, now as you—you left—as you came back, you left from France and came back here, what were you intending to do? Did you have prospects ahead of you?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, first—

ROBERT BROWN: It was two years, was it, you were—

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —gone?

BARBARA SWAN: Now, of course, the year before I went to France, I had been teaching at Wellesley but this was on a part-time level and it was—and I had been, you know, a fifth year student at the Boston Museum and—and which wasn't too demanding since it was simply further development of doing my own work and Wellesley offered me a part-time job teaching this lab. I think I told you, didn't I, about that?

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, compliments of Art History.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, yes, and I have to confess that I was quite bored, you know—

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: —doing that and so I—but I had this job and I'm embarrassed to say that when one of the classes where you had to do the floor plans of a cathedral, I simply would hand the floor plan to the class and say this is what you're supposed to copy and then I'd find a good art book on a painter that interested me and I'd sit and read that book because I—you know, I just really thought I had nothing to offer beyond copying the floor plan, you know. I might as well make some use of my time and so I—I think that I was a less than inspired person in that particular role and I went off to Paris with the understanding that I was going to return to Wellesley and they were going to give me a two-year leave of absence. Well, after one year I got a letter from Wellesley that they were sorry but they were going to terminate my contract and mentioned that there had been some slight

criticism of me being less than, you know, active—

ROBERT BROWN: Active.

BARBARA SWAN: —or interested in—in this particular aspect of the teaching, and I was sort of—my feelings were hurt because this was—in a sense, I'd been fired and I was a little bit, you know, crushed and disappointed but they did me a big favor because, you know, it was—I was locked into something which I really obviously wasn't doing well because I was bored and I—I was—the best thing that happened was to have been eased out of that because after I got back to America, then I had to find another job somewhere. So I managed to—Milton Academy was looking for someone and I taught there two days or I always liked the part-time situation. I think any artist likes that because if you have a full-time then you don't have time to paint.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: And so I had part-time at Milton Academy. Well, this for me was much more fun and much more interesting because I taught in the lower school which was 3rd Grade through 6th Grade and then on the upper school, which was teenagers, I taught the girls, but to work with smaller children, young children, was a lot of fun.

ROBERT BROWN: Why was that?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, because they're so creative. You know, they—they do—you know, you give them an assignment, you don't know what they're going to come up with, but they're lively, you know, and—and it was—you know, I was certainly not bored teaching especially 3rd Grade boys. I think eight-year-old boys are just fantastic, you know. They're so kind of uninhibited and, you know, they'll, you know, paint and they're enthusiastic and, you know—

ROBERT BROWN: But you do get bored of teaching in certain respects?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, the—no, unfortunately, I—I rather enjoyed teaching when—when it's—you're dealing with a creative problem, when you're helping a person find themselves and you're—and you're—you're—you see, I have a feeling in teaching is that there are no precise formulas and you have to kind of sense the person and your role as a teacher is to help him to find what he is, what he wants to say and then if you can give some technical advice as to the best way he can say it, then, you know, you've been very helpful.

I—I think there are teachers who will tend to impose their style and their philosophy and this, I would never pretend to do.

ROBERT BROWN: You had some of that at the Museum School, didn't you, where the teacher had at least strongly suggested learning a certain technique?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, yes, I think perhaps we—we were—might be in a sense given, you know, one certain point of view. I think that would be true, and—

ROBERT BROWN: You were saying you weren't rebellious because it wasn't put across in an autocratic way.

BARBARA SWAN: No, no. In fact, in fact, we all thought this was how you did it, you see. We weren't—we had not developed—

ROBERT BROWN: Sure.

BARBARA SWAN: And—and when I look back at the Museum School, you see, I can see now in retrospect that some students had a more powerful influence on other students and sometimes the influence would be on a student for whom that influence in no way represented his or her background. Now I told about this David Aronson or the Levine Hyman Bloom Syndrome, the Lithuanian Jewish Syndrome, and there were a lot of students who, because of that and because of also the Max Beckman and the big allegorical involvements with man's condition, would feel, well, that's what you should paint, and I think that there were students who—who tried very hard to do these monumental man suffering-type pictures and—and, in reality, they weren't meant for that.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

BARBARA SWAN: It wasn't their character. Now even I would at times try—like we'd have an assignment where you'd design a mural for something and—and I remember just being really quite—I just simply copied an Orozco because I knew that that kind of an—I thought that Orozco is the man who would do this mural and—and I'll just do something in the style of Orozco which was hypocritical in a sense on my part but never in my wildest dreams would I find myself wanting to do that kind of an assignment, simply not my temperament.

ROBERT BROWN: Most of the time you were able to follow your own temperament, weren't you?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, I think so, but it takes awhile to find out what you are.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. Were you during these years after you came back and started teaching at Milton?

BARBARA SWAN: I was—

ROBERT BROWN: Was there enough time to really settle in and develop?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, and then I—I was married by then.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: I had married Alan Fink—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

BARBARA SWAN: —and I—I then began, you know, having one-man shows at Boris Mirski's gallery.

ROBERT BROWN: This was the first—he was your first dealer?

BARBARA SWAN: He was my first dealer, right, yeah, and—and I was—and there was a great nice camaraderie and when we were very young, the openings at Boris's were terrific parties and most of my contemporaries were at that point unmarried and—and so there was a certain amount of—of restless urges involved with even one occasion a sculptor punched a painter in the nose and sent him downstairs over some passionate exchange concerning a lady and, I mean, you know, but, you know, when we're all married and in our 40s, you know, you don't have that kind of excitement at an opening but in those early days, the openings were, you know,—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, Boris engendered that himself, did he not?

BARBARA SWAN: He could have.

ROBERT BROWN: He had a close relationship—

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, and he—Boris—Boris was a marvelous character and—and—and unpredictable and you didn't know what he was going to say or do, but he had a kind—there was an art critic, Lawrence Dame. He used to refer to him as the Merry Mr. Mirski and the Merry Mr. Mirski has done such and such and it was very appropriate but Boris was in good spirits and—and sense of fun and he—at the end of an opening you'd find him sitting there and he'd sing a Yiddish song or two or it was just, you know, terrific kind of party that would be at these openings, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you seek him out or did you know—

BARBARA SWAN: He sought me out. He sought me out because he—he at that point was taking on Museum School graduates who interested him and I guess I was an obvious choice.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, what he had before you came to him, what sort of artists was there?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, let's see. Esther Geller showed with him. Lawrence Kupferman showed with him. David Aronson showed with him, I think, you know, before he even took—because David was so precocious. And he'd had a little gallery on Charles Street that didn't have much space and he made frames but then he moved to Newberry Street where there was more space and if you could believe it, he was showing paintings on three floors, I think.

I mean, he'd have

— the first floor he'd have a show and the second floor he had—maybe the third floor he had an art school. He had very grandiose plans, you know, and his sense of what he wanted and what was realistically feasible was often, you know—

ROBERT BROWN: You must have had—there was a feeling there or at least he had it that there was a great deal of younger talent coming up fast?

BARBARA SWAN: Oh, yes, yes, and he was the one place, he was the one dealer that—that would show your work and that you went to and—

ROBERT BROWN: Most others would only take established or—

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. There might have been—Dolan Richards was, you know, landscape artist. Boris was—and, of course, Boris had a—being Russian Jewish himself had a real empathy. He and David Aronson, I'm sure, still have this rapport where they both understood the whole Hasidic tradition and—and the whole sense of—and there's a certain kind of fantasy in—in that tradition that's—

[CHANGE OF TAPE]

BARBARA SWAN: Well, we were talking about the rapport with David and—and—and Boris and then other artists, you know, felt - I'm not Jewish, you see, and—and I—I suppose was rather different but then I had the very good sense to marry a Jew which I've never regretted. So in a sense I'm acceptable.

ROBERT BROWN: Was Boris particularly interested in that strain? That's what he understood?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, his artist—

ROBERT BROWN: He started out as a frame maker.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, yes, but his—his artists, I mean, Esther and Kupferman and then David were all Jewish, you know, and I think certainly there was a great sympathy and a—and a special rapport.

ROBERT BROWN: How would you characterize his feel for art, Boris Mirski's?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, he—he had—what—what was marvelous about Boris is his great capacity for enthusiasm, you know. He had this kind of—of joy, enthusiasm, you know, and a kind of buoyancy and—and a response to your work that, you know, oh, and I—I used to love hearing him describe something to, say, a customer or—or even describe some kind of a frame and he could, you know, use his hand in—in a sort of sensuous gesture and he's beautiful and he had a way of saying that word that—that was—it was just so tactile and—and the word "sensuous," I think, Boris has this emotional—he's not an intellectual response but his responses would be, you know, even, you know, has this—almost an erotic feeling, you know, and—and we all know he, you know, has his—

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: But—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, did this limit the kind of art he liked or did this—

BARBARA SWAN: No.

ROBERT BROWN: —extend his joy to—

BARBARA SWAN: I think he had—

ROBERT BROWN: —a wide range of—

BARBARA SWAN: —a wide range. I mean, he—he—and if he—if an artist brought something and I suppose he felt that he could sell it or that it was—I—I think there was this certain—but I—but on the whole in that early period, I would say it was a kind of expressionist art and



rather than purely abstract. I can't quite think of anybody that—but then that kind of abstraction maybe didn't exist then. He—he—it was—it was figurative art. Let's see. I—I—but—and, see, all of us were taught in painting to do textures in our art. We were taught to—that the paint itself should be sensuous. We were never part of this new approach of acrylic where you put flat layers and God forbid you should ever see that the brush touched it. We were trained that you had built up a texture and then you glazed it and that the whole feeling of the paint was sensuous, tactile, full of sensibility within itself, and—and Boris had a feeling for that kind of painting and his artists, I think, all had this rather delicious feeling to the use of paint and surface, and I think that would describe—

ROBERT BROWN: With Boris Mirski, did you develop fairly early a clientele?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes. He had—he had his collectors and I think he—certainly primarily Jewish because they—Boris understood them and they understood Boris and—and they also—and—and I would like to say that some homage must at some point be paid to the Jewish collector because we artists would be nowhere. If you look at the history of collecting in—in this past, you know, 25 years of the great collections are all Jewish and—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, yeah.

BARBARA SWAN: —these are the people who—who understand, who respect the creative person, and—and do it, put—put—how is that expression? Put the action where your mouth is, which is come up with the money.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you feel—have the feeling you were growing with some of these collectors, that they were beginning—was this—had they collected much before Boris's time, do you think?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I think most of these people began with Boris. Now there's—there's Steven and Sybil Stone who have now the Stephen and Sybil Stone Foundation and they've given very important paintings to the Boston Museum and they began with Boris and then there was one of his earliest collectors was Joe Girston who died quite young and it was a terrible loss and he—he's one of the nice people who commissioned me to do a portrait which included his wife and two children and—and he was a very sympathetic and marvelous and discerning man who—who bought, you know, and I—then Jerry Goldberg, who was the kind of great character amongst the collectors. Have you come across his name?

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, sure.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: What was he like?

BARBARA SWAN: Oh, he's marvelous.

ROBERT BROWN: I know he helped a lot of younger people.

BARBARA SWAN: Oh, he was marvelous.

ROBERT BROWN: He was collecting them. What was he like?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, he was—of course, he was a clothing—he was in the clothing business and you could perhaps call him, you know, you know, a man in fashion and—and a man of sensuous taste and—and he wasn't beyond, you know, giving you a little pinch on the fanny if you were female. He just—he just was a man of—of—of robust pleasures and tastes and—and—but he was absolutely an enormous support. I can remember that there would be a series of galleries in Boston and Jerry Goldberg would turn up at every opening and especially at Boris's, you know, you just knew he was going to buy a painting. He was one of the few people that, when the artist had his opening and when Jerry made his entrance, he would sashay about the gallery and look at—take it all in at a glance and before he left that night, he would have made one or maybe two purchases and he was—he—everyone knew this and he knew it and he played his role and he, of course, had a house that was just loaded with pictures.

ROBERT BROWN: These were serious collectors then? They came in half knowing that they—what they were after?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes. For Jerry Goldberg, it was a way of life. I think it was a release from maybe the pressures of the business world which was an entirely different world and when he moved into the art world, he—he had an entirely different kind of role-playing, even would invite artists to his house for Sunday breakfast or brunch, and he held open house and I remember one New Year's Day, you know, like 4 to 6, he had an open house for the artists that he had in his collection and we all went over there and he not only bought the paintings but he liked to in a sense collect the artists and have them come to his home and be part of his life and—and he had a kind of humor and—and he could tell very funny stories and he just—he just was quite lovable, I think.

ROBERT BROWN: Did either these collectors or Boris or both have any effect on your work?

BARBARA SWAN: Well—

ROBERT BROWN: What you were doing?

BARBARA SWAN: —Jerry—Jerry Goldberg bought something, some things of mine. I don't think it made much difference as to what I was doing, and Boris, I—I think that my own—I think I—no. I think that I'm less interested—I think this would be true of most artists, that the—that the collector who buys, the dealer—unless the dealer is the kind who—who intrudes on the artist, you know, some dealers—and I think that's a very bad practice. When they find they can sell something, then they'll say now, listen, I want six more of that subject because that sells, you see—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

BARBARA SWAN: —and I think that's very bad because I've seen a lot of artists ruined that way where—where they cease to develop. They've hit something that—that they know sells and then they just locked into that.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

BARBARA SWAN: And I think—I think that the good dealer takes on an artist and—and stays with him, even though there are going to be times when the artist may change his style, go through a transitional period where maybe he hasn't even resolved what he's trying to do, and the dealer will show it as—as a gesture to his respect for the artist, and it's quite possible that nothing in that show will sell, I mean, and it could be a blow. On the other hand, it could be a message to the artist that, you know, this thing has to be developed further or I've, you know, got to maybe—or—or then there's also the fact that people are used to a certain thing from you and this happens to me. I used to, you know, do these—I did mother—when my children were little, you know, I was involved with the mother-child relationship simply because it was autobiographical. It was my involvement. Well, my children are teenagers now and I'm not involved in mother-children things anymore because it's not part of my life and I'm—I've had people come up to me and, oh, we wish you still did those mothers and children now, and I just—Edna Hibel still does them and will always do them because she's a person who has an enormous business going with her art, you know, and she is turning out a product where she makes a great fortune.

ROBERT BROWN: What do you suppose the effect on your work would have been if you'd turned out a product?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I wouldn't have felt honest, to tell you the truth, in my terms because for me art is—is a constant exploration and a constant development, a constant awareness of what I can learn, and, you know, I'm—I'm now 50 years old. So I'm—I find myself in this delightful sense that I'm learning from much younger artists and—and I'm not learning all—I'm not always learning from my contemporaries anymore. I mean, my husband has a show at the Alpha and he has a new talent show where—and he's got one that's quite stunning right now and the artists are in their 20s, early 20s, some of them.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I go down and see those shows and—and I—I'm—I'm just absolutely fascinated with—with what these artists are doing but—and don't think I don't learn something from them. I think that you're always growing and what's—it doesn't necessarily have to be your age. You know, you can find—and if some of my contemporaries seem to me to be in a rut, then I—then I find my sources elsewhere.

ROBERT BROWN: I see. Because you do sometimes see your—you see your contemporaries regularly? You're still very much involved with them now?

BARBARA SWAN: Oh, sure. We have friends, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. And do you find the younger people sometimes—what do they provide you?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, it's a vision, you know. I mean, I—I'm—sometimes you can pick up an idea of technique. For instance, Gregory Gillespie out in—you know, he lives near Northampton and he's a fascinating painter and he does things with magna paint and he can build up layers and I'm not sure that I would ever work that way but I'm very fascinated to see what he can get with that particular combination of magna paint and—and glazing and—but—but—and he has, you know, very kind of strange mysterious world.

Well, see, now here's—because of my husband being an art dealer, I'm now being exposed to artists who never—I never went to school with and artists who my husband on his own has discovered and decided to show and I benefit enormously because these artists on account of my husband's their dealer, they become friends and—and very close friends in some cases and I'm always aware of what they're doing and painting and they're wanting to show me and they seem to like to know my reaction and so I find there's a rapport now with me of—of excitement with these younger people and what their world is, but I'm never going to use their world because that would be false premise on my part.

You see, I have my world and nobody's going to change that because that's me, but—but there's a hell of a lot I can learn from other artists in how best and how to express that world in an even more beautiful mysterious way, you see.

ROBERT BROWN: What is that world?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, my world, wow, that—now that's quite a question. [laughter] Wow! That one—because my world changes.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

BARBARA SWAN: My world changes, yeah, but the way it changes, though, I think I like to think of consistent. Now naturally I did all those drawings that were figurative and—and I had Anne Sexton, my poet friend, she just adores that period of mine when I did these, you know, relationships of—I've got a drawing, man carrying a man, which I—I was very influenced by medieval art and—and these kind of awesome senses of the deposition and the dead body being carried by someone. I was very involved in that period of death or life or—or—you know, and Edvard Munch was my god. I think when you say who your gods are, then that reveals your—what your world and what you're exploring, you see, and I—you know, I have stopped that now, except that I've done a book with Anne and then I've done a book with Maxine that won the Pulitzer this year—

ROBERT BROWN: Maxine Kumin.

BARBARA SWAN: Maxine Kumin, yeah, and—and in that case, you know, I'll always go back to drawing and I'll always go back. Anne's poetry, you see, she and I, I do the covers for her books because we have—she's a confessional poet and we have this great rapport because we understand this gut thing between the human and the human condition and—and I'm—I'll go with her the whole length in terms of drawing for her because I—I respect and I empathize with her world and she empathizes with mine. She bought one of my drawings and now she's in the process of owning this big man carrying a man because she's written a poem based on it. So it seemed obvious that she should have that drawing and it's on her wall now.

But what is the preamble of this is that I don't do that kind of drawing now and my last two shows at the Alpha Gallery have been devoted to bottles and people think that now why is she doing these bottles, you know, when she used to do these, you know, gut relationships and—and this, you know, sort of medieval-inspired compositions and that kind of thing and it

may seem on the surface that I've flipped my lid and I've gone into something totally different and perhaps, you know, I should have stayed with what I was doing.

I don't think so. See, for—I'm—I'm a late-bloomer as far as a painter. I've done all these drawings and I've explored draftsmanship but I've never really explored color to my satisfaction. Suddenly, I'm moving into color and it's a revelation. It's like I'm just beginning and I'm going back to where in art school I don't think I ever really was given much color experience and I, all my life have painted bottles and the reason I paint bottles is that I find that they have a great deal of life, but I always put water in my bottles and my bottles are never empty.

Now I'm sure Freud would have something to say about that. Here it is a female painter and she puts water and that's where they compare that to the womb and—and the—you know, what—what is the liquid that's in the—in the womb? You know, that kind of thing, and—and I'm—if somebody wants to say that, be my guest, you know. I'm not—I don't care. But—so I think that—that my preoccupation has—has a certain legitimate history and even in the South of France, you know, if I did a little flower study, the—the luminosity through the water, through the glass, fascinated me, and the refraction of light fascinated me.

Now I've become considerably—and I think I've become influenced by the color painting in—in the 1960s and now into the '70s because I do go to exhibitions and I do go to New York. I do see—and I do learn from it and I've become very excited with—with the pattern of light but I like to think my bottles still have a kind of—that they're alive. I would never paint pure stripes or just a square. I have to paint something which relates to the object and the object to me has to have a life of its own and it has to have its own vitality and then you get the pattern of—of reflection and in the process hopefully you—you come up with a stunning painting that exists on its own as—as a color design that could be seen in almost an abstract way in terms of the relationship of color areas, but—but I could never do an abstraction cold. I'd have to start with an object.

ROBERT BROWN: You've been talking in sort of formalist terms of your—

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: —light-water-bottles.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: But there's also the psychological, isn't there? If not the womb, at least—

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, yes. Well, you see, that could—

ROBERT BROWN: —the reality—

BARBARA SWAN: —be in a sense this—and—and my—like I got one up in my studio now where, you know, I've got four bottles in a row. Well, those four bottles could almost be like people in their shape, their configuration. They have character. Each bottle has its own shape, its own character. Then I've got the reflection in the bottle of this little seashell that—that you just see part of behind but then you see the whole seashell in the water in the bottle and this is almost like a secret character or some hidden meaning that's suddenly revealed by the luminosity of the water and—and I find I can say something quite mysterious about an object which has its own life, you see, and—and I think that I will go back maybe to painting figures and—and maybe what I've learned from the objects that I'm doing now which are kind of still life material could enhance what I might do with the figure but the relationship of the human figure in a psychological sense does not interest me at the moment.

I think some of it for me became a dead-end because I went as far as I could go and what I wanted to say I quit saying and—and then I think you can get sort of corny if you just turn it out and—and you're not really compelled to do it. It can get, you know, maybe lose some of its power and—and I think in the whole figurative realm, artists are doing a lot of soul-searching and Philip Pearlstein is doing relationships of nude figures with—with—in such a coldly objective way that there's no sensuous pleasure, either in the paint or—or in the figure, and I don't think I could want to do that, and I think I'm—I'm staying with the bottles because I can pursue my problems in the bottles, and if I go back to doing the figure, I will bring to my paintings of the figure what I've learned dealing with an object which is glass.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm. So you're—you're in a sense analytical but on another sense you don't want to be entirely abstract or—

BARBARA SWAN: No, I don't, and I'm always—there's always an emotional—I mean, I like the feeling that that—that my paintings do evoke some emotional response, that there is some pleasure.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, yeah.

BARBARA SWAN: You know, I have to laugh because artists, especially in New York, get very involved with what their position is, you know. They have these groups, like Gabriel Laderman and—and Pearlstein—

ROBERT BROWN: Right.

BARBARA SWAN: —and then Birmelin—

ROBERT BROWN: An alliance.

BARBARA SWAN: —and—yes, and they—they have meetings and they establish points of view and there's this great, you know, discussion and I talked to Bob Birmelin when he was up recently for a show at Alpha Gallery and—and I says, you know, I find it amusing you're in New York having all this problem taking a position. I says here in Boston, I says, we don't bother with that. We're all just painting our pictures and—and, I mean, I think that's an added burden that I don't think I need at this time is to paint my picture and then also have to take a position on, you know, where am I, you know, and I think that this is a problem, this, you know, overly-competitive or whatever it is art world in New York City with—with, you know, such jockeying for position and—and in terms of—

ROBERT BROWN: People have to organize to survive or at least they think they do.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes. Well, it gives them a sense of identity. Maybe it's because New York is such a large city that you don't—that you cling to each other, you know, and any realist artist with so much abstraction going on has to sort of huddle—they have to huddle together, you know, to keep out of the cold in a way because there's so much else that's kind of maybe threatening in—in that it's a total opposite of—of realistic painting.

ROBERT BROWN: Here you have more security, you think, in Boston?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, much more. I love Boston because we're all friends and there aren't that many of us and we all paint and we all go to each other's shows and we may have our little bickerings and—but it's nothing of any—I'm not aware that it's of any terrible importance and—and we support each other and, you know, I think it's just a more relaxed—you can kind of cope with it in Boston. You can deal and know who your other artists are and —and—and, you know, be concerned.

ROBERT BROWN: What about an abstract artist in Boston? Did he have the same feeling?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, see now, I'm—there, you'll have to interview one and find out. I—I—

ROBERT BROWN: What's your attitude toward them?

BARBARA SWAN: Well—

ROBERT BROWN: You mentioned how you look at their work.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. I go down to Parker 470 and—and I—I did meet Earl Powell the other day at one of Sinclair Hitchings' affairs and Earl Powell does these huge things with a spray gun, you know, and I said that, you know, I—I missed his show at—at the Brandeis but I did see it at Parker and they have a kind of, you know, mysterious shimmering quality and—and I said, you know,—and he also got a terrific review in the *Phoenix* which I—which I read and I said, you know, I envy you that review.

Unfortunately, I have the decided feeling that Earl Powell perhaps has never heard of me and this has happened before with these abstract is that with Catherine Ann Porter, I went and visited her studio once on a studio tour and I saw on her wall that she had little things of Romanesque sculpture, all of the material which I put on my studio wall, and I thought, my

God, isn't this interesting, this girl does—has all the same gods and yet, you know, she's in a different type of painting, but I went up and introduced myself and I said I was fascinated that we seem to like the same people and she had never heard of me and had never even been to the Alpha Gallery.

So I think that I'm more open-minded and more willing to meet and talk and I think some of these young abstract people have cut themselves off to the degree that—that they refuse to even acknowledge our existence, you know, and that, I think, hopefully I like to think that 20 or—give them 20 years, that the same thing is probably going to happen to them with some young artist—

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: —and they're going to be put in their place or they may even decide that—that I do exist, you know, when they see some of—some of my work inadvertently. They may realize, but this is very funny, you know, that this can happen.

ROBERT BROWN: You just mentioned your gods. You said you were interested that she had the same ones.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Expand on that. You mentioned earlier something about you've had different gods at different times.

BARBARA SWAN: Well, of course, you know, see, I love Edvard Munch when I was—when I was into the—the—my, you know, emotional drawings of—of—and, you know, Edvard Munch, of course, he—he deals with our basic life-death relationships and he's powerful and he's whole black and white concepts. See, there, I was into drawing and this nature of black and white and Edvard Munch is just absolutely awesome.

Then I've always liked Morandi and that's consistent because of my bottle fantasy and Morandi spent his whole life doing nothing but the most subtle relationships of bottles and small objects and I have a certain repertoire of bottles and small objects and I can see myself being like Morandi in that the exploration is never-ending. I can see the possibilities going on into infinity what I can do with different combinations and different relationships.

ROBERT BROWN: What—what—in relation to Matisse, saying—you mentioned when you went to the South of France.

BARBARA SWAN: Oh, I love him.

ROBERT BROWN: You had the sense of feeling and pleasure in what he's doing.

BARBARA SWAN: Oh, I love him because of his colors. See, you learn color from Matisse. You look at his colors and you're absolutely knocked out, you know. Now he's—he's—I adore and, I mean, there are many artists that I'm very—that I learn from and—and—and will change. Sometimes certain artists will be exciting to me and then another artist will be exciting to me.

ROBERT BROWN: But you've always got your own world, your own roots.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, yes, but—yes, I think I'm old enough and I've painted long enough that I have my direction and—and what I use to—where my gods lie is—is when they are artists who—who offer me something to say better what it is I know I'm saying and have always been saying.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm. You've talked now a bit about the—the role that Boris Mirski played as a dealer. What role has exhibiting, aside from your dealer, had, like in the museums and in shows generally?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, of course, every artist, you know, wants to be exhibited and this business of—of isolation in the studio naturally you want an audience and I think it must be terribly frustrating for artists who don't have a gallery and—and, you know, find it painfully hard to exhibit and there's all this work and—and it's just hidden.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

BARBARA SWAN: And I think any artist is kidding himself if he says I don't care whether it's seen or not because I think that it's very important that it's seen. My career of exhibiting, you know, you start in small ways. You know, you didn't start sending to the Jordan Marsh exhibition, you see, and then you send—then we used to have a Boston Arts Festival on The Common and I think that was a great sounding board where the years that those were going on everybody would send their best picture and they would be seen in the company of other artists and—and it meant a great deal to be seen in that Boston Arts Festival which, you know, so many of these opportunities now don't exist, you know, the Arts Festival is defunct, and—but I think slowly we're—they're building up other opportunities, like there's now the Boston Visual Artists Union. It's obvious he's going to have some exhibition programs and this is valuable.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: Now, of course, if you get into a museum, I mean, that's the living end and usually you have to be dead but—

ROBERT BROWN: But you have, of course.

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I did. This year, the Addison Gallery gave me a show in—in—of just my bottle paintings and Christopher Cooke thought it would be interesting to show just that one aspect and it was an enormous thrill for me, you know, to see my pictures in the rather high-ceilinged atmosphere of a proper museum room and—

ROBERT BROWN: Is this—could you call it a sort of final result of your work is when it's either collected or at least seen and you get the feedback from that?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes. Well, yeah. I think that—I think any artist is—is very pleased if their painting is in a good collection and by a good collection, meaning that you have some celestial company, you know, like the Stephen Stone Collection. You know, they have a Georgia O'Keefe and they have, you know, Sheelers and—and they have—they are very generous about buying local Boston artists, but also you find that you're in with—with a very serious collection, you know, and, see, there are different kinds of—some people buy a picture just because they need it over the mantle and they want shades of plum because that's what the curtains are. You know that kind of collector?

ROBERT BROWN: Sure. Yeah.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. Well, that's not—that's not that great of a compliment, you know. You're just providing a decorative object or you're—you're filling a void in the house and this person may never buy another picture because he's now got his picture where he needed one and so that's it, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

BARBARA SWAN: I don't—that—that—you could almost feel your picture's been lost in that situation but when it's somebody who—who seriously knows and buys and buys out of knowledge, you're terribly flattered and terribly pleased if that person has one of your pictures and—and I—I had a very interesting experience the other—well, a month ago because the first picture that was ever really sold of mine was out of a store window. There was one of these art festivals and they decided that the department stores in Boston should put paintings in store windows and there was a store, R.H. White, had—and this was on Washington Street. It had one of the first paintings I ever showed and it was a self-portrait with an African gray parrot on my shoulder because I grew up with an African gray parrot and a gentleman saw it in the window and liked it and then he had to negotiate with Boris Mirski, who then was my dealer, and he bought it and his name was Art Harrington. We became friends, you know. He was at MIT and he was studying sort of biochemistry or something like that and then he liked my painting so well that then he bought a second painting a few years later which he gave to his mother. His mother lived in Indianapolis and it turned out that his father and mother have an extraordinary art collection which was shown at the University of Illinois and he's given me the catalog and I can show you the catalog—

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: —before you leave, and this collection includes Rembrandt, El Greco, very

nice 17th Century Dutch, many Sieneese, Florentine, gold-leaf panels of the 14th Century. Salvador Dali did this gentleman's portrait. His father decided that that would be the appropriate artist to do Art's portrait, although Art himself commissioned me to do a drawing of him. So he's got my drawing along with—

ROBERT BROWN: Dali.

BARBARA SWAN: —Salvador Dali. Well, he lives now in this area and—and he inherited this collection. His parents are now dead and I thought—I was sure the collection would go to the Heron Art Institute in Indianapolis but for some reason it's ended up with Art and he has quite a responsibility with it. This is all museum quality, but up in his study he's hanging my portrait with my parrot and he's hanging the other one and I'm in a room with a Hubert Robert, 18th Century wonderful painting, and Tissot, who's—and it's a beautiful Tissot. You know, he's one of these that is being rediscovered and, well, I'll never be in that kind of company again. I mean, you know, that's—

ROBERT BROWN: It delights you that you are.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: It's a delightful experience.

BARBARA SWAN: Of course. Of course it is. For any artist to find that they're hanging on the walls of somebody who owns a Rembrandt, you know, you—you just, you know, feel how could—how could I deserve this, you know, and I—I think that's a fluke. I mean, you know, that just doesn't happen but it just was a very funny happened to be, you know, a series of events where this young man, you know, liked my work and gave one to his mother and she liked it, too, and when the whole show went out to the Granite Museum in Illinois, the catalog includes both my paintings and as well as El Greco and I was treated just as well. So—

ROBERT BROWN: You're proud of that.

BARBARA SWAN: —I'm proud of that.

ROBERT BROWN: You mentioned a little earlier the local—the local Boston artists were proud that we had this or that. Have—do you think artists here in Boston are—have a feeling that they're treated shabbily sometimes by the art press? Do you think New York—

BARBARA SWAN: Oh, I think, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —has taken over the—

BARBARA SWAN: Oh, well, that's very annoying. Yes, I think that's very annoying. I think they think we're provincial and, you know, it's curious. John Kennedy one time wrote an article in the *New York Times* that he'd been traveling out through the hinterlands and he'd been to some provincial museums and he praised them. He says it's lovely to be able to go out into some local museums and you see the things done in the area by those artists and you make discoveries and the artists relate to the area and it gives a kind of character to the area and then he deplored the fact that you can go to, you know, the Cleveland or the Buffalo or, I suppose, any—any museum and you get the same international painting, you know. It's all the same, you see, and—but, on the other hand, I know Hilton Kramer did a really devastating review of Harold Tovish. It was so cruel and unkind that I sent a blast and Justin Kaplan, who's the Mark Twain Scholar, sent a blast and they even published Justin Kaplan because it was just so unfair and Tovish had had a show at the Guggenheim, a retrospective, and—and Kramer was devastating and said, you know, well, this is a provincial artist, you know, and, you know, he—he did not—whereas Tovish got very good reviews in other newspapers in New York but just Hilton Kramer doing this in the *Times*, you know, was—you know, everybody reads the *Times* and—

ROBERT BROWN: Why do you suppose he did it?

BARBARA SWAN: I—I—

ROBERT BROWN: Why, in general, do they say Boston is provincial?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, you know, I think that, you know, we—we sometimes dance to a different drummer and it could be that, you know, we're—we're sometimes painting, well,



say a time of boom where it influences, you see, where—where we're involved in a different world. We're not involved in abstract expressionist in, you know, say, New York has its like Hoffman who had his school and then the disciples and so many of those Hoffman pupils have gone on and made it very big but it's a case also of knowing each other and—and—and the press finds it much more easy to do their articles on artists in New York because they're accessible and we're sort of considered whatever we do is—is perhaps second best or if we're trying to imitate, you know, Hoffman, well, then we don't do it as well. I think maybe it's that attitude, but I think that at some point, I think they have to realize that we do have our own character and we're not really imitating New York and—and New York has this feeling that everything that happens happens in New York and that that is the center of all development and I think in their quiet way they are very devoted serious artists in this area and maybe someday they'll come to realize that.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you see any sign that Curtis may be lazy and think—

BARBARA SWAN: I think so.

ROBERT BROWN: —that may be a convenient way—

BARBARA SWAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —of making history?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, and I think that once in a while and we do have a lot of crap also up here. I mean, we do have things that don't come off as aren't that good—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

BARBARA SWAN: —and—but in certain areas, I think we could hold our own and I—and then sometimes there's a tendency, like at Parker 470, to show New York artists and then they'll show the Boston artists who are in the style of the New York artists, unless a Boston artist appears who's so powerful that they—that the New York artist then has to learn from the Boston artist, I think we're always going to be considered as being influenced by New York rather than producing our own forward-looking—

ROBERT BROWN: So powerful in what way? You mean in new—

BARBARA SWAN: New, yeah, something kind of—

ROBERT BROWN: That kind of power?

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah, yeah. That sort of knocks everybody out.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, yeah.

BARBARA SWAN: Well, that happens in—in—like in Chicago, there's this sort of funk art which stemmed from—and then there's the San Francisco School with Diebenkorn and—and Parks and that—that where suddenly indelibly there was a San Francisco identity, you know, because of that little circle. Now we have certain identity in Boston, I think, say, with—and Hyman Bloom is our great recluse and—and—but he's painting and he's working and—and I think that at some point he's going to surprise everybody, you know, because he just minds his own business. He doesn't give a damn about New York press or anybody. He just likes his fish at the Legal Seafood and he paints his pictures and he's, you know, very happy and I think he's—I—I suspect that posterity will find Hyman Bloom quite a revelation. All the fanfare and all the press and what's in the news, you know, hundred years from now, some of it is pretty stupid, isn't it?

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. Most of it. This is January 23rd, 1974. Earlier, you were alluding to your work, you indicated you followed different gods and we could maybe go over the span of looking at some examples.

BARBARA SWAN: Well, going through these—you know, my photographs of early work, if you're talking about my point of view as an artist, certainly in the early work, it's figurative. Now that's figurative in terms of literally the human figure, not an abstract kind as opposed to someone who deals with objects can also be called figurative, but it's not necessarily the human, and I've just pulled out a few photographs indicating, Number 1, that I've done a great many self-portraits and I think that I would like to say that there's always been a

preoccupation with the psychological qualities of the human figure, a probing of the individual, and I have a great deal of—a great number of drawings stored away, portrait drawings, wherever I've been, I've done drawings, and which I think make a rather fascinating record of people. It's somehow my own kind of album, and when I was at the McDowell Colony, I can go back and show you in the other room, I've got, you know, a great number of portrait drawings of—of composers, writers, poets, who were there and I've been preoccupied with that.

ROBERT BROWN: Is it difficult for you to move from drawing yourself to painting yourself?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, you see, the reason I paint myself is because it's a model that's there and—and also I think that if you see my self-portraits and I'm showing you these photos and then I have hanging on my walls a couple of others, you can, through the self-portraits, also see a sense of the development of the artistic eye and point of view.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: Now I'm also mentioning this because you look around my studio right now, you'll see this preoccupation with bottles and still life, you see, and that, in a way, runs a little counter to this preoccupation with the human image and I guess that these two things are rather concurrent in my career because I found when I looked that, you know, way back I still was painting bottles in some way and—

ROBERT BROWN: With other objects as the background here.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah, yeah. Always something.

ROBERT BROWN: Objects.

BARBARA SWAN: And like is that—do you have the portraits somewhere here? Oh, this is a self-portrait with my parrot and that was done in art school and I did have a parrot but that's not fabricated.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm. How'd you see yourself there?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I think I'm being rather coquettish if you want the truth. I was young and I pulled my sweater down over my shoulder and I had my hand in my mouth as if I'm—there's a secret somewhere and I'm holding what I painted as an orange but it could be Eve with her apple. Now, you see, I'm now 51 years old and I can look at that and say, God damn it, that's kind of erotic but when I painted it, I would have been really embarrassed if anybody accused me. I thought really in all honesty that I was doing a very honest searching painterly self-portrait and that bird and that holding of the fruit and I—I really honestly don't think that—I mean, I didn't sit down and say now I'm going to do a sexy painting but I can see now looking at it, and you'll agree—

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: —yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm. So this for you is trying to bring out just what you saw?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, and I think that lots of times—I mean, I'm the first to admit it, that the artist paints and does things and they feel they're working on an aesthetic problem and I don't think they dare admit or even rationalize the other layers of meaning that come through, you see, that—that are there and later in retrospect, you look at it and you think, oh, my God, I should be ashamed of myself, look what I've—what I did—what on earth did I think—

ROBERT BROWN: There's a whole literal expressive quality there—

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: —you weren't thinking at the time.

BARBARA SWAN: No.

ROBERT BROWN: What problems were you working on at that time, would you say, in the

course of this?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, the texture of paint and that painting is done in tones of gray and it's, you know, the subtleties of gray and I was wearing a train engineer's hat which had gray stripes and the parrot is an African Gray Parrot and he was really, you know, a very handsome bird and he knew it. That—that was a painting that was bought by a man who saw it in a store window and—and he was very much taken with it and he now lives in Cohasset and he still seems to like it.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, now these others, this is during art school. These other self-portraits are somewhat after that?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, that could be art school but a little later. That's after the one with the—with the—

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm. These are a bit more pensive.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, they're always pensive.

ROBERT BROWN: There's one of you here sitting at a desk.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. They're—they're—they tend to be—

ROBERT BROWN: Why the hat with the veil over your face?

BARBARA SWAN: That was very interest—well, I love hats, I mean, and there again it was just the imaginative touch of the whole thing being more challenging and more interesting, the color of the ribbon, I mean, and you find that every self-portrait almost, I would say just about all, have a hat. That is not really a subject with my mother but I always seem to put a hat on because it just seems to top off the head a little better.

ROBERT BROWN: Why did you do this one with your mother? Again, availability of models?

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. Available, but—

ROBERT BROWN: Did she suggest it?

BARBARA SWAN: —there's quite a bit going on there that one wouldn't really care to go into. I haven't always agreed with my mother on everything and it may be in that painting a little bit.

ROBERT BROWN: There are two of you in the painting in one frame but you're apart.

BARBARA SWAN: Very much, very much apart, very much in different worlds.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, you captured this, the mood of a person—

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: —in these even though these are studies and working out problems.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah, yeah. Well—

ROBERT BROWN: Would you say these occurred without—not—not consciously?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, let's say that—that when you are excited to paint something, there's something you want to say, I mean, you just know I've got to paint this, I'm excited, I'm terribly excited to paint this person or this relationship and it's—it's a yearning and a need to get it out and I'm perfectly frank to admit that certain paintings are really—you know, have maybe a little psychological therapy. I mean, you might have a kind of—you know, some people go to an analyst and there are many ways—you can paint a little problem, if you feel a slight hang-up about your relationship with your mother and you then proceed to do a painting which shows a polarization of the two people, you've worked it out, haven't you?

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, yes, yes. You've gotten into it and—

BARBARA SWAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —seen it through.

BARBARA SWAN: Right. And that, I think, occurs in a number of—and I've painted portraits where something has surfaced in the person where the person themselves are very offended and taken aback and been upset with me—

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm. You mentioned that.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: This is a very gaunt figure.

BARBARA SWAN: Well, that's Esther Geller and she's a painter and married to Harold Shapero, the composer, and that was one of my more fanciful portraits where I created a harlequin-like background and I've got two birds hanging that are Christmas ornaments and—and a rather faceted glass tumbler which is in—that's in another—

ROBERT BROWN: This is the fascination with glass.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes. Here it turns up in here.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: Because that's always prismatic and you can be slightly cubistic with it and it makes you feel, you know, that you can break up the surface which is kind of fascinating.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: But, you know, that portrait of Esther is—is obviously not a conventional, you know, I've added quite a bit of fantasy in the background and Esther herself, a person of great charm and who has sort of a fantasy about her—her own work and—and approach and I think I was trying to pay homage not only to Esther but to her stature as an artist, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Now you say at the same time, though, the fascination with objects, with physical—

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. I think—

ROBERT BROWN: —transformations of things through light and the like.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. I was surprised because if I look back, I find that most everything that I work—now this is a portrait I've done. That must have been done in the early '50s maybe. This—this one was a very interesting painting because she posed for me. Now here again, the bottles, see, that's very early and they're appearing but it also relates with the portrait and neither of us knew it at the time she posed that she was pregnant and yet I painted her holding a bottle out of which something seems to be growing and—and this kind of secretive feeling that there is something contained and—and, of course, bottles contained with water, I suppose that has an—and I'm sure somebody could even analyze this preoccupation of bottles with water and say, oh, my, that's perfectly, you know, womanly kind of thing, the womb and the water, and there it is in there and—and we were really both of us astounded when—when she discovered, you know, a month later that she was expecting and the painting has a pregnant look.

ROBERT BROWN: This is the portrait of Emmy Spies.

BARBARA SWAN: Emmy Spies. Her husband's Claudio Spies, a distinguished composer. He's now head of the Music Department at Princeton.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm. What it does, it seems that figure is hovering something.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. I thought it was kind of clairvoyant on my part, I mean, because—

ROBERT BROWN: Those earlier ones in art school times are much softer. These seem to be getting a bit harsher.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, they did.

ROBERT BROWN: These are in the early '50s or so?

BARBARA SWAN: There's a rather harsh one of a mother and baby.

ROBERT BROWN: Mother and child.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, and that was—her name was Mrs. Caldwell Smith and that little fellow is Roderick and I'm out of touch with them, so I'm not sure what he's up to, but that—that is not a soft flattering—

ROBERT BROWN: At all.

BARBARA SWAN: —face. That's really kind of—

ROBERT BROWN: Are you still working through a lot of techniques?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes. See, I was trying some things. I was trying a more linear use of paint. See, before, I had been working totally—I mean, here, it's all flat tones of color whereas now I take a narrower brush, trying to build up the form, almost like drawing with the paint, and—and if you ever look at Giacometti's heads, he literally is—is drawing—it's a thin brush and he keeps building and building and building and it's really kind of drawing a—an—you know, in the sense of the painting and I was being more linear there rather than just purely tonal.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you mean for the eye to make—and light to make transition between—from—

BARBARA SWAN: Well, you see, I was—

ROBERT BROWN: Or did you wish to keep it harsh?

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. I kept it harsh. I'm not sure that—that, you know, later I moved on to something else but I was working out some kind of point of view there.

ROBERT BROWN: What is this?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, the one must have been in the—

ROBERT BROWN: The early '50s?

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. Funny, it's not dated. Well, I'll have to do better now. I think it's early '50s. Yeah. I was back from Europe. See, I was in Europe from '49 to '51. This one I would say would be '53 because in '53, I did a painting of a rather mad lady, mad—I hope I can find her because she's really quite marvelous, named Nina, and she was in Provincetown and—here. See, that's the same technique and that's '53 and she worked as a waitress in a restaurant down there and she dyed her hair green toward the end of the summer and astounded everybody and it was a rather unexpected person.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, this is certainly blocked out in terms of lines.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: And then it's the marbling—

BARBARA SWAN: Right. Drawing in the sense—drawing the person has been very, very important in my work. I consider myself a draftsman and—and I consider myself a—I've always felt of drawing in terms of—of draftsmanship, you know, drawing the figure, understanding the forms in a spatial sense of pure observation, the discipline of observation, and I find now, you know, we go to an art school or a young artist and many of them are—have no sense of this kind of training, you know. They're going to be abstract and they somehow feel it's not important and they don't see drawing in the same way.

Also, they copy photographs, you see. They get—they get their figure from photographs—

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: —but they don't draw it in the way I was trained to draw and sometimes

I've talked to some of my artist friends who have that same discipline and we feel we're going—we're a dying breed, you know. It's just that kind of drawing which—

ROBERT BROWN: Why do you suppose that's died out?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, because I think certain paintings, points of view in painting don't require—an artist can do a perfectly handsome painting. He sees things—he sees the abstract structure of the composition and the forms become part of that composition. Drawing is in a sense of observing the figure for itself, not in terms, say, of, you know, all of the picture frame, you know, the structure, and—and the—the—and then one takes a photograph and just, you know, can delineate the darks and the lights and can get a semblance of the form—

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: —whereas my approach is—is, you know, not to use the photograph but to work from the models, seeing the forms with the—my eye, you see, and I feel that the relationship of what my eye says to my hand and the immediate touch of the hand as response to what the eye is observing has a—and that requires great discipline and it's something that can be learned and it's like a craft in a sense. It has a—it's a learned discipline.

ROBERT BROWN: And you feel that for you this is the essential way?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, it's always been important in my work, you know. It's always been important in the sense of drawing and—and that kind of painting there, you know, I'm drawing with the paint but—but—so, as a matter of fact, Sinclair, you know, is going to give me a retrospective.

ROBERT BROWN: Sinclair Hitchings?

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. Of my drawings.

ROBERT BROWN: At the Library.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: The—well, then—but then, as always, out of this comes not merely what you've—not merely the outer—outward structure and appearance that you've observed but something of—

BARBARA SWAN: Oh, yeah. Well, then, of course, I—

ROBERT BROWN: —the mood.

BARBARA SWAN: The mood, yes. And—and naturally there I thought I, you know, made a composition and I'm interested in—

ROBERT BROWN: Now were you working using a whole range of colors here? Are you—

BARBARA SWAN: No. They're limited, limited, limited.

ROBERT BROWN: In art school, also, you had worked partly at least in a fairly limited palette?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes. Oh, well, you had mentioned that, I think, in the other interview.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: That we really didn't—I think we didn't have very good training in color. We saw things in a very kind of neutral way. This is a self-portrait that—whose whereabouts is unknown because it got stolen from Art. We had an Art Fest and that went with the rest and it's rather dreary-looking.

ROBERT BROWN: This is one from 1972.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. I think—I think I look unbelievably dreary and, you know, they're

welcome to it, but I have some good bottles in there.

ROBERT BROWN: Now the—what does it mean to you now, the juxtaposition of—is it simply drawing and close observation, whether it's a bottle or a human?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I—I studied those bottles, you know. I really set them up and they're very much observed and so I observed myself, too.

ROBERT BROWN: Sort of equal parts?

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. Equal parts, equal observation, and both done from life. I mean, you know, I stood in front of a mirror and agonized about the hand and agonized about everything and that—that was painted at a period, I think, just before I became quite ill and I think it shows in the painting. I know, I think I look really rather dreadful and I really do, you know, felt if somebody wanted to steal it, you know, they didn't steal that, they were stealing our whole art collection and that kind of got caught up in it and I'm absolutely sure that they got home and thought, my God, what are we going to do with this?

ROBERT BROWN: So that, essentially, whether it's a bottle or whether it's a human figure, the same process of close observation—

BARBARA SWAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —and out of the one will come perhaps objects—

BARBARA SWAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —only or literally possibly. Out of the human figure comes out a psychological.

BARBARA SWAN: Well, yes. Now if you want to bring us more up to date, see, I find, you know, in talking to you, I'm also trying to work out my own feelings about this—these—this—these two threads in my work, you know, the figurative—the psychological and I went through a whole period of paintings dealing with, say, the relationships of two people, you know, and—and I did lithographs and prints and—

ROBERT BROWN: When did you begin doing printmaking?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, that was in '62. I had a Radcliffe grant and was able to—they helped finance me and that was a great help. I don't know. I don't think I have any here but the relationship paintings of two—I think I have that over here. The—let's see. This is the self-portrait you see downstairs. It was done last year where I'm, you know, facing myself in a—in a much more forthright, you know, there she is.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, yes. And you're about—you're away from the harshness of the work of the '50s and—

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: —into 1962, this last self-portrait.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes. And—and you see there, there is the optical illusion. There's the combination, the synthesis of the bottles, the reflections, the water, and the figure, and I see myself in a mirror and there's the reality of what's in the mirror and what's in the foreground —

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: —and it's all, you know, an exploration. So—so in a sense, two kinds of strains come together and—

ROBERT BROWN: The one thing that's missing is the real you in there, right?

BARBARA SWAN: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: You can't be in there. You can show these objects.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes. Well, I'm showing what I see because that's what I see when I look in the mirror.

ROBERT BROWN: Sure.

BARBARA SWAN: And I purposely did myself with my glasses on because I think that to see an eye behind the glass is also like seeing an object behind a bottle, you see.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: It's sort of consistent.

ROBERT BROWN: Why is this—in contrast to this last self-portrait we looked at in 1962—so brilliantly lighted now?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I'm having—I've now become very much involved with very much clearer color and I think it has to do with—with maturing and—and I've gotten out of the murk and I'm into a rather clear and direct and, I mean, why not, you know? But I—I—I—my major preoccupation now, I have to admit, is—is the bottles and the—and the water and—and—and—and, you know, one could go on and on with the exploration of—of this problem of—of lining them up like soldiers of—of seeing, you know, enormous Matisse-like pattern inside the model. Here, a wine glass and I collect these Early American, you see them all around here—

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: —and they're Early American medicine bottles. They're terrific because they have simple shapes and—and they can be elegant and they can be anything you want.

ROBERT BROWN: And you moved from—from a pattern as in the background—

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. Or I'll have it simple in the ratio of the seashell. Here's just a real—a lot of—I lined them up. I'm also seeing things not necessarily in the conventional still life where the objects are on a table but—but certainly the—the—the background is ambiguous. You just put a plateau and then the object itself stands up and I have the object, the shadow of the object attached to an object attached to this and then you get a pattern of—of that kind of thing and then you obliterate the—the background and—and make—then you get a 2-dimensional pattern.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: And I think, you know, in this, I'm influenced by a great deal of contemporary work and—and I'm unabashed about the fact that I learn from other artists. I—I try constantly to be aware of what's going on and I think being married to an art dealer who is showing contemporary work, who's looking at the work of young artists, has been enormously valuable to me and—and I am very, you know, happy that when we look at my photos and my early things that there is a change, there is a kind of development, and there is a different exploration of space and even a change of point of view as regards my point of view in—in my training, you know.

I was trained to see certain way. Now I'm perfectly willing to admit that there are other ways to see things and I incorporate it but I like to think that this training in draftsmanship and this background is—is never wasted. I mean, it still comes through.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, it seems to stand you in good stead.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: This is close observation.

BARBARA SWAN: Very much so, yeah, very much so.

ROBERT BROWN: The adjustments you make to the background, creating an ambiguous background, alters that somewhat.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah.



ROBERT BROWN: The direction of the—

BARBARA SWAN: Now, see, this is an earlier one and here, I still have the sense of—of the floor and the shadow on the floor.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, this is definite space.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. But then, you see, then I take something like this and I eliminate any sense of where the floor ends or—and—and then you see the bottle attached to the shadow attached to the bottle, becomes almost like an emblem or an image that's almost—is totally self-contained, you see—

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: —and then within that self-contained image you get the pattern of reflection within, you see.

ROBERT BROWN: How do you—do you think your desire to create the self-contained art objects so that it will stand more on its own, whereas when you give a suggestion of background, it's the suggestion—

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, then it can be—

ROBERT BROWN: —of beyond—

BARBARA SWAN: Right. And it can confuse, I think. I think I prefer the object to stand on its own.

ROBERT BROWN: Large flowers are another—

BARBARA SWAN: Oh, yes, I did—I did a number of—

ROBERT BROWN: Those were done in the early '70s.

BARBARA SWAN: You know, huge—I did them from my own garden. The only thing is that I've seen some large flowers by Lowell Nesbitt but I think he's probably much better at it. So I may stick to my bottles.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, but these flowers again are simply beauties observed.

BARBARA SWAN: No. They're—see, this is very huge, this painting, I forget the size, but it's, you know, 54x45 or something like that, and—and I like to think they're like people and even my bottles, you see, you know why I put water in them is because they're more alive with water. You know, it gives them a life and I—I regard the flower, the movement of this, it's called the Duke of Windsor, this daffodil, and it's almost ballet-like in the curves and the counter-curves are very rhythmic, you know, and I feel that there's great personality. You know, each tulip has its own personality.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, there's something akin to the polarization of the—of your mother.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: To be more lyrical to the times.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes. I hadn't thought of that. Yeah. That's interesting.

ROBERT BROWN: But you're not particularly interested in the details of structure, are you?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, that—that—well, you see, this is bright yellow. This is pale white. So there is a little bit more structure that comes through in the photo which is black and white.

ROBERT BROWN: Now we have this tulip.

BARBARA SWAN: That's called Black Beauty and this one is called Red Sheath [ph] and you see—do you see how totally different—

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, yes.

BARBARA SWAN: —the personality—you know, I regard them as people in a sense.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, that comes across. The *Black Beauty* does seem very hidden and—

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, and if you saw it in color, it's the color of an eggplant and—and, you know, it's a kind of wicked purple.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm. So far as the other, the *Red Beauty*—

BARBARA SWAN: *Red—Red Sheath* and it—and it definitely has the sense of—of—of dominant power and—

ROBERT BROWN: It's dignified, perfectly symmetrical.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, right, and a few more of my crazy bottles. I don't know if I've got any more tulips. I might go back to tulips. It's just that I saw a Lowell Nesbitt out at Lincoln and it was about, you know, 10 feet by 10 feet and I was so—I could never do a tulip that huge, you know. My God, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: But you do make them large enough to—

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: —take on a human-like quality.

BARBARA SWAN: Right. I'm limited by the—by my studio because if I do anything over 50x50, I can't get it down the stairway because it won't make the turn, unless I unstretch it and—and take it down rolled and then I'm too lazy for that.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: And I've heard of artists, by the way, who slit a hole through the floor in order to lower these huge canvasses because it is a common problem with these huge canvasses—

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, sure.

BARBARA SWAN: —if you're on a 3rd floor, you have a stairway, you can't get it down. That's why they work in lofts, you know, and they have freight elevators, I guess.

ROBERT BROWN: Right.

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I think that—

ROBERT BROWN: I think that I see a certain consistency in much of this, from—

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. Well—

ROBERT BROWN: —the '40s.

BARBARA SWAN: —here's some—here's some—a bottle in clusters, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, again it's a pattern, patterns within the pattern.

BARBARA SWAN: Well, anyway, now just why don't we sort of look at what's in here because I just—you know, what I'm talking about is the—you know, I—I do think that painting, regardless of your point of view or your background, has to have a certain mystery and I—I just think that every artist has his mystery, whatever it is, you see, and you search out, and I think certain things that are kind of enigmatic and—and a little bit mystical. It almost has to be there. Even in the most forthright, you know, non-objective-looking thing, there is an element of—and I'm exploring at the moment in the newest paintings that element of mystery where I'll put an object behind the bottle that has water and you only see the object through the water, otherwise you don't know it exists, and then there is this curious sense of reality, you know. It is—it's to what degree is it real when I'm only seeing it as a reflection through water with the reflection of—of a striped fabric and then the pattern and all the other patterns and then suddenly you see you're looking at my painting and you see this strange seashell as slightly distorted and where does it come from, you see? Why is it there?

ROBERT BROWN: Is it behind the bottle? Is it in the bottle?

BARBARA SWAN: It's in the bottle. Is it in the bottle or behind or—

ROBERT BROWN: The reflection from a seashell not even with them.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah, yeah. And I'm going to pursue—my newest idea was silver spoons and when I get them lined up and through, I've got spoons that are in front, spoons partly in behind and partly seen through the water at which point they begin to curve and undulate in a rather strange fashion and so then the reality of the spoon, you question that reality, you see—

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: —in terms of observation and space.

ROBERT BROWN: And it will intensify. You see part of the spoon.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, right.

ROBERT BROWN: Others will be behind the bottles and are distorted.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. And in just a second I'll show you this. The thing is that I've also found in seashell in this and again there's a seashell that—that—and I've got it right here, you see, and I see it but I only—I don't see it except through the water and in the bottle, so that I've got—I've got the—all these spoons between, you know, what's in the bottle and what's in front and back and then this transient seashell that somehow has wandered into the painting but—

ROBERT BROWN: He's nowhere else.

BARBARA SWAN: —who the hell knows where it came from, you know, that sort of sense of —

ROBERT BROWN: But the spoons, when they're seen on their own, they're solid objects but when you get them in the refraction and the distortion—

BARBARA SWAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —of the bottle shape and the play of light and the water in the bottle—

BARBARA SWAN: Yes. Well, it—

ROBERT BROWN: —it doesn't seem spoon-like.

BARBARA SWAN: I think that, you know, there's a great deal of, you know,—if you look at—I think you can tell a lot about an artist by what they put on their walls for inspiration and you can see that I'm—I like to think that I'm involved in an ancient tradition because you look at these details from that 17th Century still life which is again this water or wine, in that case I think it's wine, in a goblet and—and this marvelous sort of involvement with the reflection of —of light on the glass, light within the glass, and texture.

I even have a color whiskey ad because I thought it was such a smashing photo of—of that—that whiskey and an ice cube and—and it was a fantastic delineation of this kind of mysterious color and form that goes on in a—in a full glass of liquid, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Just looking at that photograph but I see also in your paintings, don't you think the contrast is made even greater by the very apparentness of the objects, parts of the objects, and then next to them will be these distortions—

BARBARA SWAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —caused within them?

BARBARA SWAN: Right. And—and then, you see, here's a detail from a Hugo van der Goes' Flemish painting where he's got flowers in an exquisite little glass goblet. Of course, I love his Zurbaran still life because it is really exquisite shapes of these ceramic pots and

Morandi's a great love of mine and here and there are Morandi etchings and so all of these say something about my preoccupation. I think art—I always love visiting artist studios because of what they put on their walls.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. It's very indicative.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. You find—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, the very stuff of your work is right here. You keep it with you.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. I went—I visited once the studio of a much—of a much younger artist whose work is totally different from mine, totally abstract, and enormous paintings, no relationship to what I do, and to my astonishment, on her walls, she had exactly the same material that turns me on.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, really?

BARBARA SWAN: She had Romanesque things, Morandi, you know, the artists that I adore. So—

ROBERT BROWN: What process do you suppose she went through that you don't?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I—I don't know but I just felt a kinship. I thought, well, you know, she's a soul mate. We—we certainly are—have the same inspiration and you can have the same inspiration and come up with quite a different product.

ROBERT BROWN: You also have a good many family photographs and paintings in process.

BARBARA SWAN: Well, that's my kids. Those are my children. These are all photographs.

ROBERT BROWN: So that's your constellation.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. That's just I put them up there because I—that's just sort of—the studio is a private world and—and I think that photos of one's children should not necessarily be inflicted on—on the downstairs living room company but privately for one's own pleasure kept—I keep them in my studio.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, do you work outside the studio much?

BARBARA SWAN: Well—

ROBERT BROWN: Or do you like to?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, see, in the summertime I go to Rockport and I have a very small little shed in which I paint, so I move my studio to another place in the summer and I get a lot done there, but otherwise I—I don't work outside. I don't paint outdoors or anything like that.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: I hate to sort of babble on about nothing.

ROBERT BROWN: This is June 12th, 1974, the fourth interview with Barbara Swan in Brookline, Massachusetts, and today we're going to talk about your printmaking and when did you get into it and for what reasons, how does it work with the—with your painting and other aspects of your career?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, first of all, I began print-making when I received a Radcliffe grant. In 1961, I was a member of the very first group of women who won grants of up to \$3,000 and perhaps I should explain what this grant is.

ROBERT BROWN: Sure.

BARBARA SWAN: It—it was—the idea was—belonged to President Mary Bunting of Radcliffe who had obviously at times in her life had a certain frustration since she was a scientist and had wanted to do research and was also raising children and I think she realized the kind of frustration that comes when a woman has a certain amount of training and is so-called gifted and then bogs down on the home front and—and, you know, has to take care of children and

just feels a little bit trapped.

So she founded the Radcliffe Institute for Independent Study which is for women with a Ph.D. or the equivalent and who are so-called gifted. Now when I received this grant, I had a two-year-old and a five-year-old, respectively, and I used the money for babysitters. I immediately bought a dishwasher which I, you know, have yearned for, and the marvelous thing was I didn't feel guilty about all this indulgence because Radcliffe, in a sense, said we believe in you. Now, you know, do what you're destined to do and we will give—this money is for you, is to buy time, and I used everything I could that would buy time so I could then devote myself as an artist.

Because I had this extra money, I decided I'd always yearned to do some prints but I had no idea how to go about it but George Lockwood, a very gifted and interesting printmaker, had founded a workshop in Boston called Impressions Workshop and for a fee, he would, you know, provide lithographic stones and then would print editions and would also be of technical assistance and would advise you on how to go about doing a lithograph and he set his workshop up specifically for the, you know, highly-trained artist, the professional artist. I mean he didn't intend it to be a school or for beginners. It was specifically for somebody with my type of problem where I had a certain achievement as an artist and I had a point of view, something I wanted to say. I'd already been trying to say it in painting. I wanted to expand my sense of media and there was George and I just couldn't resist and I went down and I said, you know, I'd love to do some prints and he was delighted to have me and it was the beginning of a very satisfying and rewarding relationship.

ROBERT BROWN: What was your point of view at that time?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, you see, my point of view then was very much humanist, very much involved in the figurative image, and my printmaking then was definitely based on drawing and lithography was very satisfying because you simply stood in front of the stone and you drew directly.

Now I go up to Impressions and they're doing a lot of photographic transference on to the stone which I find in a sense a little bit cheating because to me the great pleasure was in the power of your drawing on the stone.

Also, now in my development, I—I—just the other week, I was down to Impressions talking to Steve Andrus, who now runs it because George died tragically when he was 40. The thing is that I got to change my whole outlook on how to do a print because now I'm more into painting and if I want to do a print based on my paintings, it's an entirely different challenge and—and, you see, and I have to think of—of different ways to get a pictorial or painterly image, whereas my first prints with George were definitely a kind of drawing thing which, of course, in—in the whole tradition of print-making, I think drawing and draftsmanship, I mean, all of the low track prints, you know, are just exquisite examples of draftsmanship and this was the—was the tradition in which I felt myself and—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, then your painting at the time was going on a separate track.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes. My painting wasn't really—hadn't really resolved itself. I—I feel looking back that my paintings, I was still struggling and I was working on—on a figurative image and—and now I'm—I'm into something entirely differently but I think that the paintings are, you know, I'm solving things in terms of color and—and relationships which are now satisfying to me but I think at that time and for—and for very logical reasons, I was doing mostly drawings, mostly prints, and my paintings were rather less important in my life at that time. That would be in the '60s and I—I just simply concentrated on—on—the human relationships and—and figures.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you work from models then?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I—I worked from—

ROBERT BROWN: We should look at some of them.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. Well, I think that—

ROBERT BROWN: And you were able to, with this grant, work pretty steadily, were you?

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. Well, I would go to the Impressions Workshop, you know, once or twice a week and I'd work on a stone and now there were certain themes. I—I had my very first print is—is based on a father and child. Now I don't know. This is not—this is a second version but I'll just show you that it's—it's—you see, I think you see because I had small children and also perhaps as a woman, I was able to observe the father and the child rather than the mother and the child because that was my observation was to see the father's side of the relationship and I did a number of prints and they tend to be rather somber. See, this is a—a drawing on that idea.

Now this—

ROBERT BROWN: So is this typical that you would make fairly detailed drawings—

BARBARA SWAN: Yes. Now that—

ROBERT BROWN: —beforehand?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, sometimes. Sometimes I had a drawing. I'd have, you know—I think I would generally. Yes, I'd have to do a drawing first so I knew, you know, what—what I had in mind. This print right here that I'm showing you is the very first print I did with George and there's a lot of heartbreak to lithography or printmaking because there is the possibility of disaster. What happened with that print was that after—I think I only got eight at the most and the stone broke and this can happen. You know, it will just crack and that's it and I only had eight prints and that was why I went ahead and—and did a second version of this father and child.

You see, I think you could say I'm influenced by Munch or the kind of somber black, you know, expressionist, you know, human relations and—

ROBERT BROWN: Were you conscious of that at the time?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, of course, I'm conscious in the sense that—that I loved looking at Munch prints and, you know, you have your gods and you always—it's a key to the artist's point of view if you figure out what they're looking at or admiring.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, there's almost a tragic quality to this.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, definitely.

ROBERT BROWN: Now was there this in your perception of yourself or—

BARBARA SWAN: Well, the tragic—

ROBERT BROWN: —human relationships?

BARBARA SWAN: No. See, the tragic quality, and I think it's—it's in—in all of my, say, relationship is—is the transitory sense. You see, I wanted to show the—this tenderness and yet the child grows up, the father grows old. So—so the sense of the moment which is captured in—in this particular image but it's only there and it's there in my lithograph but in reality, you know, it's in constant flux. It does—nothing ever stays permanent. So maybe in that sense, you—you try to instill that as a kind of haunting quality and also within this two-figure relation, each one is rather within his own world alone and I think loneliness has always been a theme in my kind of more human documents, is the—is the essential solitary state of man, and—and I'm now eminently much less involved with states of man and I'm into bottles which I find somehow more joyous.

I think as you get older sometimes you become more joyous in what you do. I don't know why.

ROBERT BROWN: Here, the hands, the gesture is—is extremely poignant.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: That is the only link between the two of them, isn't it?

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: The posture.

BARBARA SWAN: Right, right, right. And of course, it makes a composition. Then I see I did this second version but the first version is still so much better. It just kills me looking at it now again, you know, after having seen it for so long, how much better I like the first than the second one, I don't think, you know, just isn't, to me, as satisfying as the one that—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, the second one is a little wispiest, isn't it?

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. It didn't—it's not as rich in its black, you know, and—and—

ROBERT BROWN: You just mentioned rich. Now were you very aware of the quality of the medium?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you intrigued by that?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, of course, because in—in lithography, you can get this fantastic black.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: Now here's—here's another—while we're on that one thing, you know, if an artist is into a theme, there will be many versions, now here is a father and children and in this sense, it's—it's the father and—and a child on top and a child, you know, but—but that one again has this kind of sad—

ROBERT BROWN: Each head is in its own little—

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, right.

ROBERT BROWN: —cocoon and it's linked by the—again by the gestures of the hands.

BARBARA SWAN: And in this particular print, it's two-colored and the draftsmanship is in the black stone where the drawing—and then using the crayon for certain rhythm and texture and then the color of tan simply giving a kind of unity to the lights and darks and making little islands of light, you see, in the heads which again is that cocoon, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, yes.

BARBARA SWAN: It enhances that sense. Now, somewhere I have—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you find the medium at all difficult?

BARBARA SWAN: No. I—I actually adored the medium because it was so easy to—you know, it was just kind of—for what I—

ROBERT BROWN: Direct transference of your drawing.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. What I was into, it was just kind of perfect. I—I'm just sort of looking. I do have another version in green but maybe it will turn up.

Now probably my best one, my best print and, as usual, you do something and you never know in print-making, you know, how successful or whether it's going to sell, and sometimes you make small editions and immediately that is—you know, everybody wants that and then you make a large edition of something else and—and you're stuck with it. You know, you can't—it's very hard to know what—what somebody's going to like. Well, the one that—that was a real winner—

ROBERT BROWN: That's because you're so close to it and your perspective is quite different.

BARBARA SWAN: Well, my *Emily Dickinson*, you see, in—

ROBERT BROWN: This is your most successful print?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, for—for—you know, in terms of being very popular—

ROBERT BROWN: Popularity.

BARBARA SWAN: —and also in terms of, I think, it just came out very interestingly. Now I would like to say about this one that there were two versions. Now here's the black version and then there's a three-color version and when I started out and I was working with George and George, I could see, was very excited by what was happening in this print because he would keep hovering around me and—and would get terribly excited and terribly kind of, you know,—I could just feel George was almost as if he were doing the print with me and was equally, you know, creative and—and excited—

ROBERT BROWN: He was the craftsman?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, and he was—see, he was sort of helping me to make the different layers of color. Emily Dickinson, in her own words, said she had eyes the color of sherry. So in order to get the color of sherry, I started with a burnt red and then a kind of gold amber and then a very neutral lavender to just kind of fuse the whole thing.

Now the first image, the burnt red image, the trial proof was in black just to see how all of the drawing and so forth was coming along. My husband took one look at the black version and he said, you know, you'd better print some in black, it looks so terrific just in black, and also my husband, you know, and I think he's right in a way, that the nature of—of lithography and the graphic medium is really best expressed in black, you know. If you're going to do it in terms of—of a powerful image, the black is still your best bet, you know, often, except that with George, if you know his work at all, he became totally fascinated with the possibilities of color. So naturally to make the sherry-colored eyes intrigued him in helping me achieve that effect.

ROBERT BROWN: He's a virtuoso?

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: An attempt?

BARBARA SWAN: Right. Now what we ended up was we—we—we played it both ways. We printed 15 in black and 20 in the three-color. Well, it turned out I should have made 50 black and—and 50 in the three-color because what—the three-color version now hangs in Emily Dickinson's home in Amherst, Massachusetts, and it's right outside her bedroom and Amherst College bought it and I couldn't be more, you know, flattered and pleased, you know, to see my *Emily* hanging in her own house, you know. I'm really knocked out by that.

Also, at the Houghton Library in Harvard, they have a lot of her furniture and her—her—her dresser and her library is in a kind of sanctum sanctorum in the Houghton Library and—and they have the black version which the curator asked me to donate to their collection because they're not—they don't have the funds to buy prints. It's not their bag.

ROBERT BROWN: Now which did you end up preferring?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I liked—

ROBERT BROWN: Your husband preferred the graphic strength of the black.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. Well, I find—I find that if you look at the two, it presents two different Emilys. In the black you get a much more forceful—you—you sense the strength, this hidden strength that—that caused her to be a recluse and yet have such powerful, you know, inner life, and then I find that the color one is more introspective, is a little quieter, a little softer, and a little bit more gentle, and so when people—when—at the time when I was selling them and I still had enough, people would choose a black one or a three-color, depending on how they felt about Emily Dickinson. You know, it would also reveal something about their own sense of Emily and so there's something to be said for both versions.

ROBERT BROWN: In the color version, it seems to me to be much more within an ambient sort of environment of light and color—

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: —interplay and she emerges rather slowly from it.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, yes, yes, and yes, there's sort of layers of meaning, you know. There's sort of layers of color and—and whereas in the black, it's absolutely no nonsense.



ROBERT BROWN: What did you think about the use of color in your prints as compared with your use of it in paintings then?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, you know, it was—it was terrifically exciting to use color, kind of tricky, and it reminds me of glazing in painting, you know, where you put an under color and then you glaze transparencies and you can get that quality so beautifully in lithography.

ROBERT BROWN: Of glazing? Something like it anyway?

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. Something like it. I mean, you see you've got this—this lavender and you put the lavender over the—over this amber and immediately it neutralizes it, you see, in the sense of a painting.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Well, in places you get the whole color. In other places, the glazing effect, and it's a matte quality to it.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: A flatness.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. And then, you know, the paper, you make a decision whether you're going to use—I use BFK paper. If I'm going to use cream or white—I use—I think I used the buff on the color one and the white on the black, so that it gives more contrast, and the buff on the color makes it—the paper, it, too, becomes softer in that kind of—

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, and it increases this feeling of an environment around this, doesn't it?

BARBARA SWAN: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: Because it gives some relation to the basically reds of the color of the line.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah, yeah.

[CHANGE OF TAPE]

ROBERT BROWN: This is the second tape of Barbara Swan. Further on the *Emily Dickinson* print, particularly the color version, once you had done this color print, what did you see as the potential of color? Did it—did it satisfy you? Were you pleased with it, in what way?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, yes, it—it excited me in the—in the sense of, you know, subtle possibilities of relationship. It also scared me a little bit because you have to plan ahead. If you're going to have three stones, you've got to decide, you know, how they're all going to inter-relate and—and mesh and it—you know, there's certain complications in the whole thing.

I think that when I continued with my printmaking, I—I—I think I could honestly say I did not explore the potential of color as much as I might have liked. Partly, of course, it's expensive to, you know, do several stones and although, you know, in—in some ways I was subsidized, I perhaps was a little bit scared of—of, you know, sticking my neck out and maybe, you know, having a total failure and George Lockwood, see, was able to constantly experiment because he was doing his own printing and—and he could, you know, put, you know, six-seven-eight layers of color and—and he was really treating the stone like a painter, you see.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: But he could do it because he was printing it himself. If you're depending on others to print for you, you're a little bit at the mercy of somebody else's expertise.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, were you there constantly as he printed?

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. I'd be there but—but, you know, and I would sort of have something in my mind and then, you know, you had to make sure the printer kind of understood what was in your mind, whereas if you're printing it yourself, then—then, you know, you're on your own.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: I—after George was—gave up the workshop, he—he actually gave up the workshop before he died and he sold it out to Steve Andrus and Steve Andrus had a printer named Herb Fox and I worked with him and it's terribly important that you do have a rapport with the printer, you know, and—and there's now a fellow named Paul McGuire who—who I think would be very nice to work with and if I—you know, I'm hopefully going to start another print and then you build up a relationship with the printer and—and he's kind of your—an extension of your hand, you know. He carries out what you want.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, now in this color lithography, did you—you mentioned George Lockwood's trying to paint in lithography.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you feel you were doing some of the same?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, but in a very limited way, you know, just—in fact, this is—is really kind of chiaroscuro and it really doesn't explore color in the way you would, you know, in—

ROBERT BROWN: Multiple stones.

BARBARA SWAN: With multiple stones. Yeah. Still—it's still a colored drawing. I call that a colored drawing, not really a painting. Wouldn't you?

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, yeah. And you thought of yourself then primarily as a draftsman?

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. I was doing mostly drawing. It was interesting that that was, you know, related to—now—

ROBERT BROWN: You were mainly doing portraits or figural work?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, that was—yeah, yeah. Figures. Now I also was very involved in—I did a—I had a whole show of drawings at the Boris Mirski Gallery and nothing but drawings and they all were related on relationships of—of two heads or two figures and—and this always was fascinating, I mean, this human sense of contact, yet loneliness.

Now I did do some etchings of—when I was at the workshop and in that case, I worked with somebody different. George had—there was a French etcher and I can't remember his name but he's now teaching in Boston somewhere and he—

ROBERT BROWN: The Mirski show was the same time as you were doing that?

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. Another person was Zano.

ROBERT BROWN: Zano Cola [ph].

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: I think Zano worked with me on this one. Now—now this is a later period. This was, you know, in—long after I had—

ROBERT BROWN: The late '60s or so?

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. It would be late '60s, I'm sure. Well, middle to late '60s but a little later, and this is called *Le Column* and I did a lot of drawings and, as a matter of fact, I had a show in New York City at the Coburn Gallery in 1968 and this was in that show, so that gives you a little idea of when the date was, and the—the nuance again, you see, is—it still is based on—on drawing and—and, you know, linear cross-hatchings.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, you can tell by the form and volume.

BARBARA SWAN: Versus the tonality of aqua tint which in a way is—is using aqua tint and etching and—and getting, say, a similar quality that's in this lithograph of—of the tan and black.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes. And this etching, there's a precision quality to it.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: The aqua tint sort of meshes it together.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. And, of course, I was fascinated with etching. Actually, once you're into print-making, you—you—you want to explore and there were certain qualities that I could get in etching that I couldn't get in lithography, a much more, you know, precise line, more—more the line of ink, you know, and I—and my drawings, I think I should say, are all—all ink and wash or just ink and—and I seem to, in my drawing, like the discipline of a crotchie pen, India ink, and—and I don't care for charcoal or any kind of smudge thing. I like to—I find it very challenging to just, you know, use ink because, you know, you can't move back.

ROBERT BROWN: You like the exactness?

BARBARA SWAN: Well—

ROBERT BROWN: Very defined?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I like the—and I like the—

ROBERT BROWN: In lithography, you're saying in *Emily Dickinson* you achieved that through chiaroscuro?

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: A great deal of the clarity comes through that.

BARBARA SWAN: In the black version, you know, the crayon and so forth and—and you can use different qualities.

ROBERT BROWN: The *Le Column* idea, was this an idea that you pursued in drawing?

BARBARA SWAN: Oh, yes, I did.

ROBERT BROWN: What were you trying to express, do you think, through this? Here's two people.

BARBARA SWAN: Well, you know, they're interlocked, you know. The one head is interlocked underneath the other head.

ROBERT BROWN: The column is a container?

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. And—and—and there's an ambiguity in the kind of mystery in the relationship, you know. It's—it's the way people in—in, you know, lovers in any kind of coupling relationship have this ambiguity of—of closeness and apartness, you know, except that when you put it in a column, you also then get a kind of abstract image, a kind of vertical thing that just goes zooming up through the paper and to me it had a kind of rhythm that was exciting to me.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: And, unfortunately, I don't have any of the drawings right here because I could, you know—then you could see what I had in mind when I was doing the drawings.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Well, did you at this point while you were doing a good many prints, did your drawings cease to be quite as—as finished and complete as they had previously?

BARBARA SWAN: No, they were—

ROBERT BROWN: Remembering the preparations—

BARBARA SWAN: No. My drawings were considered what I call a meal in itself. I mean, my drawings were—were totally complete and totally complete statements. They never were sketches. You know, sometimes if somebody is a painter they will do a sketch but my drawings were meant to stand on their own as a complete statement about the human relationships.

ROBERT BROWN: Parallels in the drawings and here in the etchings.

BARBARA SWAN: Right, right. And the drawings would be quite large and—and done with a sense of—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, the impression of the etching plate itself and the wide field here of knowing, this surely you thought of as part of the way to achieve the impact?

BARBARA SWAN: Absolutely, and it—it's based on—on the drawings because I had done a whole series of drawings with this vertical column just going right up through the middle of the paper and the impact is in order for that to look like the column and to have that sort of soaring, you know, upward thing, is that you have to have this white on either side to isolate it and then it has—then you have—then it has its rhythm.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. And the—the aqua tint effect you have on the margins where it seems to sort of flake out a bit—

BARBARA SWAN: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —seems to strain against the—

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah, yeah. Well, see, it gives this bloody flame-like thing but when I worked with Zano, you know, it was a lot of buffing of the surface, I mean, fooling around with the, you know, aqua tint and scraping it and—and getting these tonalities was very exciting because, you know, I was learning all this time, you know, what you can do with aqua tint.

ROBERT BROWN: Did he tell you to experiment?

BARBARA SWAN: Oh, yeah, yeah, and for me, you know, who'd never done this kind of thing, it was always full of revelation, you know. I mean, I couldn't believe, you know, what you could do.

ROBERT BROWN: You didn't mind the labor, the laboriousness of it?

BARBARA SWAN: No, I didn't mind it, except that I'm not too sure I'm that good at it and I—I'm, you know, very grateful in doing an etching if somebody else prepares the ground and I'm very grateful if somebody else puts it into the acid and I would say to Zano, well, I want, you know, a thin line here and I want a medium line there and a black line there and then he would figure out how long it should be in the bath and then we'd take it out and block it out and, you know, he would—he would figure out the logistics of—because I would be too terrified, you know, to do it myself because I—that whole thing with that acid bath, you know, terrified me. I was very grateful that, you know, Zano would just take over that role, you know, and decide how long it should stay and—and I was, you know, very trusting that he knew what he was doing. I didn't trust that I knew what I was doing.

ROBERT BROWN: You'd rather not have gone through these experiments on your own?

BARBARA SWAN: No. No, I'm not at all—and, of course, you know, don't you notice how the person who prints on his own is generally totally a printmaker because it's so time-consuming and—and any artist who is a painter and a printmaker inevitably, I think, has it done by somebody else and you look like at Matisse and Picasso, the whole tradition—

ROBERT BROWN: They're all done by skilled artisans.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, yes, because—but then, you know, you get an artist like Peter Milton or—or Richard Zeman [ph] who—who print their own prints and they're kind of nuts. You know, they're sort of fanatics on—on printing but that's all they do, you know. I mean, they're not necessarily doing painting.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: Although I think Zeman maybe has begun to paint a little bit but certainly Peter Milton is completely a printmaker. I think you have to be almost.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm. Well, were you by this time exhibiting quite widely your prints?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, yes. No. My prints were around. Oh, and *Emily* here won—won a prize at the Philadelphia Print Club and which meant she automatically—it was purchased by the Philadelphia Museum. So she's in the Print Collection of the Philadelphia Museum. She just absolutely was a winner from the beginning. You know, I mean, I guess she didn't—

ROBERT BROWN: Sure.

BARBARA SWAN: She was, you know—you have these children, you know, one, you know, is a star in the firmament and then the others, you know, you get—then you get duds, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, your etchings are a little bit more intimate, a bit more subtle, as is this one?

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. They're—

ROBERT BROWN: I suppose they wouldn't have the same kind of popularity, would they?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, let's see. The column one, I think, I mean, I still have quite a few left because I've never promoted it that much. There were some bought but, you know, it wasn't like *Emily Dickinson* where even now I get letters from people who've seen *Emily* some place and want to buy it and I, you know, I'm still getting requests and it's sort of crazy. Now let me see. I can look in terms of I think that if you want to talk about other aspects, I—you know, now I'm painting bottles, as you know, and—and I did at this early stage do—oh, here's—here's another just—just that same column idea but just—I call that just two heads, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: This is not nearly as tight as the other one. This one—

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: And there's a column in the background, too.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you ever involved with the Boston Print-Makers Group at one time? They had shows.

BARBARA SWAN: Well, once I sent something in and then I got lazy about it and—and since I'm really not terribly active about promoting—

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: —these things and I got sort of lazy, I haven't been—

ROBERT BROWN: That could take more time even than preparing the plates.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah, yeah. Right. Now I—I would like to—let's see. Oh, I know what I was going to show you. Yeah. I have to put my mind on what I'm up to here. It's not in there. Oh, I—you know, in my interest in bottles, now in my painting, I did do some etchings. Now that's called *Winter Bottles* and—and it's printed in a kind of gray ink with some aqua tint in order to get this sort of chilly effect and then I did a kind of major opus which is—

ROBERT BROWN: This you would have been doing when, about 1970 on? Something like that?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, this would be in the late '60s, you know, '68. Too bad I'm so vague about the dates.

ROBERT BROWN: This is directly paralleling what you're painting by then, right?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, yeah, yeah. This is—this is a case where—where the—in fact, this is based on a painting. The painting is around the corner there somewhere.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: And I—actually now, you see, the print—the prints are involved with the

bottle image rather than the figurative image and—and this is a case where something I explored in the print, I went on and explored even more in depth and in my paintings and have now evolved a whole different style of painting, based—

ROBERT BROWN: What were you exploring in these prints then?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, here I was exploring, of course, all this kind of fantastic reflection and movement within a bottle that has water in it and I have a drapery behind and so that the reflection of the drapery. Well, now in my paintings I've simply blown up the whole image of reflection and—and—and I—I concentrate on—on the reflection rather than necessarily making a—a whole still life. I'm really moving into the bottle itself.

ROBERT BROWN: Rather than the surroundings.

BARBARA SWAN: Right. And, of course, Morandi is—is the artist that I really, you know, have studied and loved his—I think his etchings are exquisite, you know, and he certainly was a mentor in his pursuit of bottles, you know, in an etched way. You know, there's things about this print that didn't really resolve but it was a terribly ambitious thing to do in the first place.

ROBERT BROWN: This particular one we're looking at has a very scratchy effect.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Why?

BARBARA SWAN: It was just strictly line. It's no aqua tint and—and I studied the same Morandi and I realized that he could get a feeling of tonality simply by the thickness of the line, how long each line was etched, you know, would go from light to dark, and, for instance, in the background here, it was interesting to put just lines rather—not too close together, you know. They're relatively far apart but by etching it a long time and getting those lines to be rather black, you get a tone that's rather interesting as opposed to other tones where the lines are close together and—and maybe etched much lighter.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: You see, so that there's a very great preoccupation with varying tonalities in terms of—of the degree it stays in the acid but you can see from the complicated image that I, you know, went quietly out of my mind figuring out what to stop out and what to, you know, leave in and all that.

ROBERT BROWN: What is unresolved in here, would you say?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I just—

ROBERT BROWN: You still like the bottles.

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I just think that some of the drapery just got awfully complicated and I don't know whether if I—you know, now—now I would see it in a much more kind of simplified way but that's—that's just my own artist kind of hang-up and maybe the people might look at it and, you know, find that sort of—

ROBERT BROWN: Of course, it is equally interesting with the bottles and their reflections and you said now you tend to concentrate more on the bottle itself—

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. I do.

ROBERT BROWN: —rather than your own—

BARBARA SWAN: And I don't want to bog down with drapery in the sense that I did in that print. I would like to just mention, well, I did several bottles but that's sort of an example, but you might be interested in my relationship with the poet Anne Sexton whom I have drawn and while I was at the Impressions, I—let's see. I had a commission to do a broadside. George had a terrific idea where artists and poets would collaborate and result in a broadside, you see, where you'd have the image and then he'd lovingly set the type and laid the poem and so I did a number of—well, the thing is that I seem to have everything here but the broadside.

I took the image. By the way, I had a commission to do a poster for Anne for the Carnegie Pittsburgh Lecture Hall. So this is the image that was on the broadside and then instead of printing the poem, they printed a poster out of it, but it was a poem called *For The Year Of The Insane*. Well, as a result of—of working on that and the fact that Anne had a Radcliffe grant when I did, I've ended up doing a book with her and then I seem to be her cover artist, you know, and then this is a line drawing that I did which she used on the back and so it's been a very satisfying relationship and that's what's another thing that's quite fun was that in terms of print-making, it enlarges your horizons, you see. Prints go out and they can be distributed. There's, you know, a larger audience. Then there was the fact that I could do a print for Anne for a poster and then I could do the broadside and then in terms of the drawing, I was able to do a book and I think for me as an artist it's been marvelous to accept new challenges, you know, and work with a poet as well as be a painter as well as be a printer-maker and—and my relationship—I've always had these sets of—of literary involvement and, I mean, I did Emily.

I've also done a large lithograph of Katherine Mansfield whom I admired at one point and thought was, you know, kind of exciting. I've also done the drawings for Maxine Kumin's book of poems, *Up Country*, which won the Pulitzer Prize that particular year. So that was exciting. Actually, I've worked with two Pulitzer Prize poets and I think I ought to quit while I'm ahead. I don't think I can—

ROBERT BROWN: Now in—let's take the working with Anne Sexton. Here's the poster for the 1967 Carnegie Lecture and the same image on the top as was on the broadside—

BARBARA SWAN: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: —with her poem below. What were you doing with *The poetry of the insane*? Were you attempting to—

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. Oh, that's good. That's a good question because Anne Sexton is an autobiographical poet and she has had a great deal of emotional trauma. She's been institutionalized. She's had breakdowns and this is all very much in her poetry. First of all, the poem has to do with—it's called *For The Year Of The Insane*, and it's about her feeling of being, you know, in a mental institution and she has the image in the poem of holding beads and speaking to Mother Mary and—and counting the beads of a rosary.

So I did some drawings. Anne came over and sat for me and somewhere around here I have drawings but the original drawing is in a private collection. Somebody bought the original drawing. But the face, this is definitely Anne. These are her eyes and—and now this is the beads, you see, and the two hands holding the rosary beads, and then this is Anne but it's the two sides. In the *Year Of The Insane* there's this other side, this other sort of schizophrenic personality that—the—the kind of terribly tormented sense of—of the person who feels they're rather mad, you know, and there's this—you know, there's this anguished torment and so it's—it's one face and looking out which is the outward Anne and then this other face which is this rather more haunted image and for some reason I—I make out fine collaborating with her because, you see, my work, if you look around, you know, there's this kind of haunting sense of—

ROBERT BROWN: Tragic.

BARBARA SWAN: Personal and tragic sense in some of my prints and—and the kind of human relationship which is full of certain kind of haunting anguish and so when I moved into Anne's world, I found that it was very—I was comfortable in—in dealing with that kind of image.

Now when I did the book of poems called *Transformations* which is based on Grimm's Fairy Tales, but in all of them, with *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Rapunzel* and all of them, her poems deal with psychological relationships. There's a sort of dramatic theatrical sense of confrontation, you know, between—in *Snow White*, it's the confrontation in the Queen and little Snow White, between the aging beauty and the young beauty, and this is a universal theme, you see, and—and when Anne called me up and asked me to do these poems, I said send me a poem. I wasn't sure what they were all about. So she sent me *Snow White* and the minute I read it, I called her up and I says, oh, my God, Anne, I says I love that poem, and I says I've got to tell you I identify with that poor old queen and Anne says, So do I. So we had some fun, you know, doing that together. That was great fun.

ROBERT BROWN: You had fun doing it, even though it comes out of the—

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. Well—

ROBERT BROWN: —tormented levels, right?

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. Right. Well, you see, I think she did—she was sort of fun for me because doing those poems, I was able to—as a matter of fact, I've got them around here somewhere. I was able to do something maybe wilder than I would have on my own. You know what I mean?

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

BARBARA SWAN: I have—I have the drawings. All right. There's the drawing for—for the *Snow White*, you know, and they're both looking into their mirrors, you see, but you get the old queen and she's—I put, you know, false eyelashes and she's been to the hairdresser. She's got every part going for her.

ROBERT BROWN: Right.

BARBARA SWAN: On the other hand, to me, Snow White is terribly smug and complacent and—and all she's got going for her is she's so damn young, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: So this is—it's a rough contrast.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. Rough, and I've got her hand, you know, that kind of gnarled and bony and then this kind of totally, you know, growing graceful thing and—

ROBERT BROWN: But rather structuralist.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: You found a parallelism then right away with Anne Sexton?

BARBARA SWAN: Oh, yeah. No.

ROBERT BROWN: The book jacket you did for Anne Sexton, the drawing is on the back. Now here, you see Anne Sexton as she must also see herself.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. Well, she posed for me.

ROBERT BROWN: Seductive.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. With her hat—oh, she's, I think, handsome-looking person.

ROBERT BROWN: Why did she want this on the jacket?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, she liked it and—and she's even mentioned this drawing in a poem but it's in the newest book called *The Death Notebooks* for which I also do the cover and that she did a—mentions in a poem how she sat for me and we had ginger beer and vodka together. That's what fun, knowing these writers, you know. You end up being mentioned in their poems.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: Sometimes—I'd like to tell you about this. The first—the first cover that I did for Anne Sexton was *Live or Die* which was the book, I think, that won her the Pulitzer. Now she had a—the cover designer, the woman in charge, came up with a cover that Anne couldn't stand. It looked like a children's book cover and Anne said, "I can't bear it and I won't, you know, use it" and she came to me in desperation. She said, "Do you have a drawing I can use on my cover?" So, you see, this is one of my relationship drawings which —

ROBERT BROWN: Like the column?

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. Like the column. Now, unfortunately, that drawing was done to go diagonally. I had it on a diagonal rhythm and this cover designer did it vertically just because she, you know, thought she was making a better design and that annoyed me in a



sense but what really annoyed me was this terrible lettering going across my drawing and just blocking it out and—and even the woman who did it after it was finished and printed said, "Even I'm offended by those letters." I mean, I don't know what she had in mind because it's a delicate drawing, rather Gothic in feeling, you know, very Gothic and spiraling, and then to put these, you know, hideous black letters over it, I was just furious.

So the next cover—actually, *Transformations* had one of my drawings and there wasn't such a great problem but in the *Book of Folly*, I decided that I was going to get even with that lady at Houghton-Mifflin who does those cover designs and I was going to make my drawing the letters.

ROBERT BROWN: The letters.

BARBARA SWAN: And then she—I had her over a barrel. See, she couldn't—she couldn't ruin my drawing and now within each one of these letters are figures relating to the poems. She's got a mad lady with a chair, who holds a chair over her head. Here is Lazarus. Here is Christ Crucified in the Y, you see, and I was able to fit Lazarus, Christ, this—this strange creature with long hair. She's got a story all to do with long hair, and—and, you know, little mad strange things all and death as a jester, you see. That's the whole point of the book, the Folly, is that death is the jester, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: All of this is in the letters. So I was able to do the drawing and—and it's also kind of like illuminated books, you know, if you sort—

ROBERT BROWN: Here in this case, you found a way to deal with what—

BARBARA SWAN: I did.

ROBERT BROWN: —otherwise was the most aggravating—

BARBARA SWAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —loss of control.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, yes, and I'm still having problems with that lady at Houghton-Mifflin.

ROBERT BROWN: But you—you feel you want to do—continue to do this sort of thing, despite these—

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I—I—we're now in a little battle going there, but I think we're—Anne—Anne—we're going to win out but there's a woman who designs these book jackets that we're totally incompatible with and this is a great problem, but, you know, Anne has a certain clout, so I think we—we'll—between the two of us, you know, we can—

ROBERT BROWN: And be very pleased to do it.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: You like this idea. This is again mass production, isn't it?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, yes. Oh, my God, and I did the book for Maxine and, you know, I'd go to a book store and there's my thing and I don't get much money out of it but there's just this great satisfaction of seeing a thing in a book. I think that's fun.

ROBERT BROWN: And was it—is it also—have you always intended that your work be seen?

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Have you thought of the process—

BARBARA SWAN: I think so. I think especially in—in drawing and graphics and things like that, you do like to have an audience, a large audience. The paintings, it's a much smaller audience, and if you do have a one-man show of paintings, you know, who sees it? Whoever comes to the gallery. But—but you put your stuff in a book and—and you find that Wichita Falls, Kansas, has reviewed it and said they liked your drawings. Well, how else would I be

seen in Wichita Falls?

ROBERT BROWN: Right.

BARBARA SWAN: I mean, I kind of loved that, you know. When Anne's book came out, she—she felt we were together on it, you know, because my drawings are very much part of the book. So she would send me all her, you know, critics, her reviews, and I was getting reviews from Dallas, Texas, and, you know, the West Coast and—and this was great fun, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Was this part of your creative urge, too, to have feedback?

BARBARA SWAN: Oh, I think so. Don't you think any artist likes to know they've been seen—

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: —and there's been some kind of appraisal? You like that.

ROBERT BROWN: Sure. Because if you haven't, what do you feel?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I think that's awful and I think you'd rather they said something awful about you than that they said nothing. I mean—

ROBERT BROWN: You don't exist if they say nothing.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. And if they say something awful, it means you shook them up somehow, you know, and I always tell my friends when they have a bad review that, you know, really that's much better than just some sort of mediocre nothing.

ROBERT BROWN: So this has been the—became a very active part of your print-making and drawing—

BARBARA SWAN: Well, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —was designing—

BARBARA SWAN: These two books.

ROBERT BROWN: —and illustrating—

BARBARA SWAN: It was another facet, not that I may never do another again because I'd like—I did it because of friendship, you know, with the two poets, and I may not—you know, who knows but it's not—it's not as if I had an agent and I was out there hounding the publishers to please, please let me do a book, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Right.

BARBARA SWAN: That's not my—I just did it out of friendship.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, you were able to work as you please pretty much, aren't you?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Since that time of Radcliffe grant?

BARBARA SWAN: That was a real turning point for me. That was definitely a real turning point. God bless Radcliffe.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, now, drawings. Do you still make any prints?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I've given up print-making. I'm still drawing all the time and, of course, I should probably mention that my—my great love is—is portrait drawing and—and, you know, I—I've—and I like to draw men, which I think I have a perfect right to say, and I don't know what—what feminine liberation would say to that, but men are always drawing women. So I think it's perfectly honest for a woman artist to say she likes to draw men, you know. I do think there's less vanity and you can kind of close in and I did a portfolio for Impressions Workshop which was commissioned by Steve Andrus and it's called *Friends of the Artist* [1970] and they're all prints of male artists whom I like and have enjoyed. One is of Tovish and Arthur Polonsky and Mike Mazer and Albert Weinberg and Bernard Chaet.

ROBERT BROWN: What were you trying to convey in those?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, they were—I was trying to convey a print that had the artist himself and maybe even a sense of—of his own work sometimes. Like with Tovish, I had a strange little floating thing over his head which actually was based on one of his sculptures, and each one is in a different—Arthur Polonsky is holding a light bulb and is looking very funny because Arthur is a kind of amateur electrician and makes really wacky kind of electrical things, you see, and I put that in the print and—and Bernard Chaet has terrific long legs and—and really I paid homage to his legs.

ROBERT BROWN: So these prints are almost caricatures?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I could show you. Did you ever see them?

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. Well, we looked at them.

BARBARA SWAN: Oh, well, they're down underneath. If you've seen them, why, then, I—

ROBERT BROWN: In these, do you feel—what were you doing? Is it more of an intimate for friends kind of thing?

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. It was, you know, commissioned as a portfolio and it's in this kind of a case and—and each print is different. I suppose Steve Andrus thought he was going to sell it. I'm not sure it sold very well but—but it—I think that it will have its interests maybe years from now. Oftentimes these portfolios—I know that—who was it? Reddone [ph] did a series of prints of friends of Bernard and—and different artists and I don't think it sold much at all but—but now it's a collector's item. So I think in time it will have its fascination as a documentation of—of how one artist saw another artist.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, in the process, did you learn—become much more conscious of your own position, your own style?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I—I—

ROBERT BROWN: Your own life?

BARBARA SWAN: When I do portraits, drawings, see, with these artists, I—I did drawings first and the drawings all belong to the Boston Public Library and then I did the print and I made each print in a different one—some were lithograph, some were etchings. One of Sig Abeles was a dry point which I just drew directly on to the plate as he sat for me and that was very daring. It, you know, scared the hell out of me to do that. But I—I—I find that when I—I love doing portraits because—and I like to change the technique to say something about the inner character of the person, you know, it's a way of trying to make some kind of statement and like I told Mariana Tovish the other day that—that I—I was doing a portrait drawing of Seymour Shifrin, the composer, and I says, you know, I love doing these because I don't have to worry if it's a great work of art. I'm simply paying homage to a friend, you know. That's what it is.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

BARBARA SWAN: You know, if you have a feeling of friendship, what nicer way to express it than to do a drawing and say something about the friend?

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm. Well, as I've seen those portraits of the artists and as you describe them, it sounds as though you're trying to characterize them and also sort of place them in their associated—with an associated attribute.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. That's right. Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you begin to see yourself in that way, too? Do you have—are you very conscious of you yourself and your attributes, your—your role?

BARBARA SWAN: Well—

ROBERT BROWN: You mentioned when you began print-making, you were very conscious of being a mother and—

BARBARA SWAN: Oh, I see what you mean. Yes. Oh, I like to—almost certainly yes, I think that one's art is always conditioned by one's own life, environment, and—but, you know, the curious thing is that with me is that I—when I did these early prints of like children, fathers and children, the minute my own children became older, I was no longer interested because, you see, my inspiration came from observing the—the child around me. Now I know women artists, like Edna Hibel, who goes on doing women—mothers and babies and—and she's, you know, a grandmother, but, I mean, she—it didn't make any difference, you know. That became her theme. She stayed with it right through.

For me, it lost its interest when my children were a little older.

ROBERT BROWN: What interest took over?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, that's when I got more into bottles and other aspects, you know, and—and I don't—I don't—and it always annoys me because I sometimes—people say, oh, yes, we—you're the one, the mothers and children, and I—and I—I've outgrown that, you know, but sometimes your audience doesn't and they all kind of wish you still did them, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Why did you transfer from—from people, from exploring their—them and that imagery into, say, the bottles? You have without exception, I know.

BARBARA SWAN: Well, the bottle thing to me has great possibilities of exploration and there's a great—when you put water and you get all this reflected life inside, to me bottles are very alive and—and have a great sense of almost being like a person. I mean, they're—and I think that when I became involved in painting, there's just such infinite possibility for visual exploration, you know, of an object. I think that in terms of drawing the human figure, you know, after all I am trained, you know, in terms of life drawing and—and actually in drawing the human image is very important to me but in painting in terms of color and also don't you think that the painters all through time are preoccupied always in a way with light? Look at the Impressionists and all—all through. I mean, it's light and luminosity. So naturally in painting, I became totally transfixed by the sense of light in a bottle, you see, and I'm dealing with light which is a painterly point of view and—and whereas the drawing in draftsmanship, it's a figurative point of view. Does that clarify it?

ROBERT BROWN: It does. Do you know why your drawing is a figurative point of view? From your training? From your—

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. Because I love people, I love drawing people, I love—I'm—I mean, I do love people.

ROBERT BROWN: And whereas in the medium of paint, the colors take effect, the light effect?

BARBARA SWAN: Light, luminosity, and light.

ROBERT BROWN: The bottle is almost like a human in its reflections.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. And it's shifting, always changing, and it's transitory. Maybe that's a little bit, you know, that human image is transitory. It grows and changes and—and the light can change and move and it has that transitory sense. It's the same—and you want to hang on to something, you know, to capture. It sounds corny but, you know, capture the moment.

ROBERT BROWN: But the—the human image, you feel you can capture that transitory just as well in the drawing or print?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Rather than a painting?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, in fact, I—I have made some, I think, done paintings that were quite bad in that whereas in a drawing I get something direct and then I get into a painting and it gets overworked and—and—

ROBERT BROWN: The transitory nature got lost when you did the human figure.

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I've done portraits, you know. I've been commissioned to do a painted portrait and I think I'm much happier doing a portrait drawing because I think you

get something more spontaneous. I mean, a painted portrait is, you know,—can be certainly terrific but it's just much more problems and the only painted portraits that I had any satisfaction has been some friend sat for me and didn't give a damn how it, you know, came out and I was just trying to make a compositional arrangement, but I've had bad experiences when I've had a commissioned portrait because you never know the fantasy of the person who commissioned it. I mean, they may imagine that they look like who knows who, you know, and—and then you paint them looking like somebody else.

ROBERT BROWN: You see them as something else.

BARBARA SWAN: Yes. So I—I'm not very happy doing—I don't—the only—I do commissioned drawings because there's nothing great, nothing is lost really if it's doesn't pan out. You've only had a couple of sittings and if it—if it doesn't work out, it's no great loss, but painting, you know, you spend hours on it and then if everybody's miserable about it, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: It's a pretty bad thing.

BARBARA SWAN: Who needs that? I think official portraits are deadly, don't you?

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, yeah.

BARBARA SWAN: Awful. Do you ever—

ROBERT BROWN: You've seldom had to do things, be commissioned for an occasion, have you?

BARBARA SWAN: No. I—I—when I was younger, you know, I—

ROBERT BROWN: In the case of the working with Anne Sexton and Maxine Kumin, it's because you got into it because of your initial interest in it?

BARBARA SWAN: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: You sort of moved with them.

BARBARA SWAN: Right. And I had something I believed in, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: And/or the commissions of the Impressions Workshop, Steve Andrus, for the artist portraits—

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: —that you knew.

BARBARA SWAN: Well, but wasn't that a nice commission on the part of Steve, knowing my interest in portrait drawing, to give me the chance to do them in prints? Wasn't that nice? I mean that's a perceptive patron, you see, somebody who—who sees what the artist is involved and then says here, do—I'll commission you to do this and he's commissioning the artist to explore something which is meaningful to the artist. That's an enlightened patron.

ROBERT BROWN: Have you found this fairly steadily, enlightened patronage?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes. I mean, I've been lucky, I think.

ROBERT BROWN: What do you think you'll be doing now in the future?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, I'm—I'm just, you know, really think that my paintings are on the verge of some sort of breakthrough. I just think I'm just beginning, you know, as a painter, you know, and so that there are, you know, endless exploration there. Now what I want to do is maybe go back to print-making and—and say something about my bottles in prints in a different way than—than I've done before, you know, in print-making.

ROBERT BROWN: How do you think you might do that? Enlargement?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, who knows? I mean, I'm going to do some studies this summer and see what, you know—you know, be totally different, you know, image than I have done before.

ROBERT BROWN: But you feel pretty free and flexible?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes, I am, because I—I had to give up teaching because I had a health problem and perhaps it was the best thing that happened to me because teaching is exhausting and it takes a lot out of you if you're conscientious and so it's left me now with more time to do my own work, you see, and so many of my colleagues, you know, have to teach and they have to earn a living and I'm kind of lucky in that in a sense I had to give it up and then I have a husband who's an art dealer and he, you know, feeds me and puts a roof over my head. So, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Sure. Well, do you find now that your rhythm is very different because you don't have to go to work?

BARBARA SWAN: It is, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you gather your strength and take your time about that?

BARBARA SWAN: Yes. Of course, sometimes I think you waste time, you know, because you've got too much time and then you—you sit and read the morning paper too long.

ROBERT BROWN: But you pick up ideas here and there, do you think?

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Fragmentary impressions at some point that coalesce?

BARBARA SWAN: Right. Yes. Yes, I think there's more time to—to daydream about things, you know, and there's less rush and less pressure.

ROBERT BROWN: And yet you are going steadily along, say, with the bottle paintings?

BARBARA SWAN: Oh, they're developing very much, you know, very much.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you think you'd come back to that as a discipline technique?

BARBARA SWAN: Well, it's a discipline of the eye. It's training myself to make discoveries of—I have a new painting out there. I went to the British Virgin Islands in March and I think we haven't seen each other since then and I took with me—I knew I was going to be a week in a house somebody lent me and I wanted to do a water color or something because I'd never been to the Caribbean. Well, to do a regular little water color of the Caribbean can be terribly corny and so I took a brandy snifter and I filled it with water and put it on the porch and I took photos with a telephoto lens and inside the water of that brandy snifter is a whole universe, the whole landscape of Tortola is reflected inside and I brought home and enlarged the photos and I'm doing a large painting of—called *Homage to Tortola* [*Tortola*, c. 1975] and I get an entire landscape upside down in the water and this absolutely knocks me out, the possibilities of this. You know, I can't begin to tell you what that's going to lead to. But it's a marvelous way to do a landscape but then you get the shape of the glass so that it's—there's a certain element of control and—and then—then you're—you're dealing with a beautiful area but—but not doing the usual postcard picture.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. The beauty is that it's upside down.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah. Well, I'll show you—I'll show you.

ROBERT BROWN: Directly to proceed.

BARBARA SWAN: I'll show it to you before you leave.

ROBERT BROWN: There's sort of a playfulness to this.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah, yes. There's sort of a trick of the eye and—and, you know, then actually the best way to see the landscape is to turn the picture upside down.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, of course.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Sure. But you mean it to be seen anyway.

BARBARA SWAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: The right way.

BARBARA SWAN: Well, it's a big painting. It's probably hard to turn it upside down. That's it. Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]