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Oral history interview with Earl T. Fields,
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Transcript

Interview

[Mr. Fields, formerly a painter on the WPA Art Project in Seattle, is now the official photographer for the Seattle Art Museum.]

DB: DOROTHY BESTOR

EF: EARL FIELDS

DB: What I would particularly like is to ask you first about what you yourself actually did when you were on the WPA Art Project.

EF: Okay. This painting here [showing one of his pictures] and there was a painting "Still Life" that went to a national show, had been exhibited in Washington D.C. [Interruption by Museum visitor]

DB: Well now, you were saying that your paintings are right here. Maybe you could describe them. [Considerable moving around of pictures.]

EF: This side

DB: Now, you were saying . . . if you'll get a little bit closer to the mic.

EF: This one here is project work.

DB: I see.

EF: You have "The Stove " painting, and "Mt. Rainier."

DB: Oh yes, that's one of the ones I saw in the list of the Museum's permanent collection of WPA paintings.

EF: There is one painting that went to that exhibit at Washington, D.C., that is packed I don't know where.

DB: A lot of them are still hanging in government buildings there; those that were permanently allocated to Washington.

EF: This is another interior painting; they were mostly interior things that I did. Just those four there, three here; these others are not project things. I painted them later.

DB: Oh! But there are yours as well?

EF: These are mine: "Bachelor," "Study Hour," "Round Potbellied Stove."

DB: Yes, I've seen that in a list of several exhibits. I think that was in one of the Art Project traveling exhibits that were sent around.

EF: Yes.

DB: And is that one of yours too?

EF: No.

DB: Oh, I see.

EF: And this is back from New York for some reason. A New York critic was writing about how "Mr. Fields had achieved in the painting of a farmer what Grant Wood has been trying to do and didn't."

DB: Oh! Well, that's very nice. Quite an achievement. Your farmer certainly has a more clearly defined character than Grant Wood's farmers, doesn't he?

EF: Actually, he is my father.

DB: Oh! Well, no wonder you should bring out the essential spirit of the person then.

EF: I used to study his farmer painting...all of his painting in the evenings... [TAPE INAUDIBLE HERE.]

DB: Well, what had you done in the field of painting before you got on the WPA Art Project?

EF: Not much. I just

DB: You studied painting where?

EF: I studied painting at the University of Washington.

DB: Yes.

EF: And I was traveling around trying to find my bearings and I stopped here at the time that the Project started. And I had a studio there on 17th Avenue in the top of a garage; it had a fireplace in it. In fact, in this painting the stove is up there in that studio that I'm using.

DB: Oh! And do you remember what year it was that you got involved with the Project? Was it at the very beginning in Seattle in 1936?

EF: Yes, it was at the beginning, I know. I don't know if it was the beginning of the actual Project, but anyway it was the beginning of the time in Seattle that they started using painters. At the beginning I don't know who the head of the Project was. Inverarity? Anyway, we stayed home, they told us to paint anything we wanted to.

DB: Oh.

EF: You know, gave us two weeks' time to each painting, and then report, take it down and show it.

DB: Well then, you were "on remote control," as they called it?

EF: Yes. All by myself I stayed home at my studio.

DB: Did you find it was a good way to work . . .

EF: Yes, very much.

DB: . . . or did you feel it was sort of deadening to know that you had to do a certain number?

EF: Well, in a way the time element wasn't pressing, you know, two weeks, they said, within two weeks. That gave you plenty of leeway there. Well, you can choose your own subjects and paint any time you wanted to. So I was very happy doing it. For me, it ended too soon.

DB: Oh, how long were you on it?

EF: I don't think I was more than two months on it.

DB: Oh!

EF: I don't know what happened. Then at the time I started See, they were building the Museum, and I started working here.

DB: So they decided you weren't about to starve.

EF: Yes, I suppose.

DB: You weren't a starving painter, so they didn't need to patronize you. I see. Well, you accomplished quite a good deal in those two months.

EF: Yes, I think so. I did four of my paintings.

DB: You didn't ever work in the studio at the Bailey-Gatzert School then?

EF: No.

DB: Did you know most of the others in the group who are in this photograph?

EF: Well, I knew Twohy, and Cumming, Elshin, and I notice two others there. Marsh I knew slightly. Patrick, yes, he was over at the University at the time I was there. Ransom Patrick, and Gonzales, the rest of them -- see, I probably met some -- I remember seeing but I don't remember

DB: That's Lubin Petric, I think.

DB: No, here's Pet.

DB: Oh! We.., I was speaking of Lubin Petric, not Ransom Patrick.

EF: Oh! Lube! Yes, that's Lube. I know him.

DB: Yes?

EF: Yes.

DB: He's going to have a show this fall with Bill Cumming, presumably.

EF: I haven't seen him lately. Oh yes, and Richard Carrell. He's in New York, isn't he?

DB: Oh, is he in New York?

EF: I know he was, he went there.

DB: Someone thought he had died, but he wasn't sure.

EF: Oh!

DB: Several things have come to mind that I wanted to ask you. Let's see, which one first? Well, do you think that it worked out well for you and for Seattle artists as a whole, this Project?

EF: Yes. As far as I can tell and according to the others I have talked to, you know, they were real pleased the way they were handled. Of course, I don't know how these group projects

DB: Apparently there were a few sources of friction in the group projects.

EF: Then there's another group I They did more of, oh, not actual painting, but

DB: Background for the Museum dioramas and things like that?

EF: Yes, and historical

DB: Yes. One of these groups was directed by Dr. Erna Gunther of the Anthropology Department. I've talked with her.

EF: Yes. In talking to some . . . there was quite a bit of friction there. There was one man by the name of Ted Abrams.

DB: Yes.

EF: He was in the group. I know he was always complaining about this and that.

DB: Oh! I see.

EF: I never was actually down there to see what they were doing. I never saw the place.

DB: Oh, you didn't?

EF: No.

DB: Oh! Malcolm Roberts was mentioning Ted Abrams the other day.

EF: Oh yes. Was he . . . ?

DB: Malcolm Roberts was down there, yes.

EF: Oh yes.

DB: He was sort of Inverarity's right-hand man.

EF: Inverarity was

DB: Yes. You remember Mr. Inverarity?

EF: Yes.

DB: Were you directly under his supervision? Did you have to show your work to him, or not?

EF: No. I just

DB: Whom did you make these reports to every two weeks or so?

EF: Oh, this girl -- Miss . . . ? I can't think

DB: Miss Olsen?

EF: No.

DB: Miss Thyng?

EF: I can't remember. She probably was Inverarity's right-hand man or something . I didn't have to show anything to Inverarity.

DB: I see. Do you think that something like this ought to be a continuing thing, that is, some sort of government sponsorship of artists?

EF: I think so. I think it would be a good thing for young artists, you know, starting out, to have a thing like this.

DB: How do you think it ought to be arranged to avoid friction as much as possible and governmental control?

EF: Well, I . . . now that I don't know. Of course, personalities -- you have a group working together, and especially, you know, people who know each other, and this friction starts, and it's probably not the fault of the project, the way it's handled, but just individual things, as far as I can gather from talking to Mr. Abrams and

DB: Yes. Well, as some people I have interviewed have pointed out, most all of the artists were very young at the time they were on this, and Mr. Inverarity was very young, too.

EF: Yes, that was one criticism I heard about his, you know, not knowing what he was actually supposed to know, you know, leading a group like that he just pretended that he

DB: I see. You don't think then that he was really an artist himself? Or that he wasn't a good administrator?

EF: Yes, the latter is what I gather from these criticisms, and probably there were more criticisms about personality than anything else.

DB: I see. How do you think people in Seattle, the general public, if there is such a thing, reacted to the Art Project when they saw the various evidences of it around? Were they made more interested in art? More aware of art?

EF: I think so.

DB: Dr. Gunther was thinking that there was a certain amount of hostility to it in that, every time there was a rumor that the Project was going to end, there would be cartoons or editorial comment in the papers. "Good! This boondoggling, Rooseveltian scheme is going to wind up. It's high time too! Spending taxpayers' money on art," that sort of thing.

EF: Yes. That's always the reaction to some extent, you know.

DB: You didn't feel there was a great deal of that?

EF: I don't think so. Well, that's probably the reaction of the section of the population that don't want to see modern art exhibits and so forth, you know. Anything that changes the so-called status quo, they are against it.

DB: Very true. So now I think the public is more receptive to trends.

EF: I think they've It's time since the first project, now all these years people have had this art museum, and then other art museums like the Frye, and all those We have numerous galleries They sprout up, you know, and people gradually learn, and they constantly see these new things come up, so they kind of grow up with it, and get used to it.

DB: So they might be more receptive . . .

EF: Yes.

DB: . . . to an art project if it were tried again . . .

EF: I think so, yes.

DB: . . . than they were in some cases to this. Well, let's see, I had one other thought. Oh, I know. [Would you hold this microphone?] I was going over the material that the Museum lent me to have microfilmed, and I came across all sorts of interesting things. One is these two pages headed: "Captions for photograph panel, murals, sculptures, et cetera," and "Captions for photograph panel, galleries, and teaching." Now these apparently had to do with the WPA Art Project achievements around here. In fact, this note on the side says "WPA." But do you happen to remember whether these were in connection with the show that the Museum had after a number of delays, in December 1941? And whether perhaps even those panels, those photograph panels might still be in existence on file in the Museum here? Do you know? Do they ring any bells with you? It would be awfully interesting to have them photographed for the Archives if those panels were still around. It's sort of tantalizing because it looks as if those were great photo montages that some of you got up at the Museum for the art show in '41, but Dr. Fuller says he can't be absolutely sure that the WPA Art Show was finally given. From the evidence of the Museum Library's folder, it seems as if it were. But there were several delays. And then when December '41 came, of course, Pearl Harbor was just happening. So the exhibit was rather overshadowed.

EF: Yes. I vaguely remember, for instance, this mural at Arlington High School -- but I can't -- I'm not sure now just what it . . .

DB: You don't think those photographed panels would still be on file here or in the Museum library?

EF: I doubt it. Well, have you talked to Miss -- the librarian here?

DB: No, I haven't yet. I will.

EF: She is the one who would know about it.

DB: Fine. I'll investigate a little bit further about those. But were you connected with the Museum in December 1941 when . . .

EF: Just at the time of Pearl Harbor?

DB: Yes.

EF: Yes.

DB: And the museum did have that big show, didn't it, that they had planned to . . .

EF: Mmhmm.

DB: . . . and corresponded about so much? I know Mr. Fuller kept writing Mr. Inverarity and vice versa about delays during the year before, first, the re-decoration of the Museum and then other questions about when the material would be assembled and how much space they could have. Do you remember anything about whether the exhibit was a success and well-attended? Of course, with the national emergency it would be somewhat overshadowed.

EF: Yes. That . . . I don't recall just what . . . Soon after the first of the year I took a leave of absence and worked at Boeing until the war was over, helping the war effort.

DB: Yes. Most Seattle artists did one way or another have a period at Boeing. And, of course, some are still there, like Andrew Chinn, among others.

EF: Yes, and Bob Luke. I don't know whether . . . I guess he's still there.

DB: It seems from some of these records that there was probably an earlier exhibit of WPA art work in the middle Thirties, not such a big splashy one as the Museum had. Do you remember anything about that?

EF: No. No, I don't. I remember vaguely, but I . . .

DB: Yes. Well, no reason why you should. This was a long time ago and I wish the Ford Foundation had thought of collecting this information a lot sooner.

EF: In this business, you know, shows come and go. They take one show down, put another one up, and it's hard to just recall one particular . . .

DB: Certainly must be. Well, is there anything else that you want to get on the record about the WPA Art Project or the Washington Statewide Art Project?

EF: Well, as I said, I think it was a worthwhile effort. It all depends on how it's handled -- the leadership.

DB: Well, fine. Thank you very much.

EF: You're welcome. END OF INTERVIEW