



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Leonard
Kaplan, 1965 June 19

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Leonard Kaplan on June 19, 1965. The interview took place in Laguna Beach, California, and was conducted by Betty Lochrie Hoag McGlynn for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

The original transcript was edited. In 2022 the Archives created a more verbatim transcript. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Try it out to be sure it's picking up our voices. This is Betty Lochrie Hoag, on June 19, 1965, interviewing the artist Leonard Kaplan in his studio in Laguna Beach. Mr. Kaplan, do you use a middle initial after the Leonard?

LEONARD KAPLAN: No.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: And Kaplan is spelled K-A-P-L-A-N.

LEONARD KAPLAN: That's right.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: And Leonard, L-E-O-N-A-R-D.

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yes.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Correct? Mr. Kaplan is a very active artist today. As a matter of fact, he's getting ready for a big show down here, and he's working while we're talking this afternoon. He's one of the youngest people whom I have interviewed who was on the Project—was in school during the first part of it, and only came in on the latter part. Before we talk about those days, I would like to ask you something about yourself. Would you tell us when you were born and where you were born, and where you were educated?

LEONARD KAPLAN: Let's see. I was educated in New York, born in New York.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: What was the birth date?

LEONARD KAPLAN: 1922.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Did you go to the public schools there?

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yes.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: And when did you start your art training?

LEONARD KAPLAN: Well, frankly, most of it was in the WPA.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: I see. You hadn't really gotten into it, then, at the time—you were into any artwork at the time the Project started.

LEONARD KAPLAN: The actual artwork was more or less teaching.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Excuse me.

[Audio break.]

LEONARD KAPLAN: [Inaudible] in New York, and that's more or less what happened.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: At the alliance?

LEONARD KAPLAN: Educational Alliance.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Educational Alliance. Now, I don't know New York. I'm not familiar

with it—

LEONARD KAPLAN: Oh, I see.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: —at all. Is it a school or—

LEONARD KAPLAN: No, it's in the same category as the Henry Street Settlement house [inaudible], a place where the neighborhood, more or less, goes to study anything they particularly want. They had courses in painting, writing, most anything like that. I think they even had a gym—it was just—I think, more or less, keep the kids out of the street.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Oh. [Laughs.]

LEONARD KAPLAN: That's about what it amounts to. I'm not sure, but I think Ben Shahn came from there. Oh, quite a few of us had that kind of background in East New York.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Did you have any particular teacher there who got you interested in art, or had your family been artistic or—

LEONARD KAPLAN: No, no.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Where did this come from?

LEONARD KAPLAN: There's a Mr. Ostrowski [ph]. I remember him. He's probably—

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Ostrowski [ph]?

LEONARD KAPLAN: Ostrowski [ph]. O-S-T-R—oh, I forget. This is many, many years ago, and I haven't even mentioned this name in the last [they laugh]—I know, 30 years, at least. Oh, wow. Yeah, I actually was about 13 or 14 when I started there.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Well, sometimes these teachers are interesting. For instance, Schwankovsky, whom I've interviewed, was a teacher of Jackson Pollock and Manuel Tolegian if you can imagine—

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yes, yeah.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: —two more greater extremes in painting.

LEONARD KAPLAN: Tolegian collected Pollocks, I understand.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Oh, really?

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yeah. He collected them.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Well, they were very good friends, of course. They [inaudible] the country two or three times.

LEONARD KAPLAN: Curious because I've worked with Mr. Schwankovsky on the backdrops of this festival when he was director.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Oh, did you?

LEONARD KAPLAN: Oh, yeah. I did the backdrops for years, of these festival paintings.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Well, this leads me right into another question. You mentioned that you hurt your back doing architectural sculpture.

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yeah.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: And this, of course, was later that you were doing this work.

LEONARD KAPLAN: Oh, yes. It was 15 years, yeah.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: I mean, long after the project. Where were you doing the work? What was—what kind of things?

LEONARD KAPLAN: Oh, I recently—in the last 15 years? Well, it was for Walt & Beckett [ph],

and I did the Nordic Room and the [inaudible] Room, all things throughout the country. St. Louis Stix Baer & Fuller building.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: St. Louis what?

LEONARD KAPLAN: Stix Baer & Fuller, that's a big department store. I was one of the originators—well, one of the few who started polyester resin murals, and things like that.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Wow. Interesting.

LEONARD KAPLAN: The Hilton was all done in whale bone—five whales. It's still up there, I'm sure. I didn't hunt them, but I found 27 whales down in La Paz.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: My goodness.

LEONARD KAPLAN: We hauled them up here and cleaned them. Oh, that was quite a story. Well, most everything I've ever done has been something like that. It's—

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Well, what did you do? Put the polyester in over the whale bones to preserve them, or—

LEONARD KAPLAN: No. Oh, no, no, no.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: —[inaudible] them in it?

LEONARD KAPLAN: I embedded polyester resin in whale bone and made the whale bone a translucent—with lights inside the bone, and the scapular with huge birds. You can see—I think it's still in the Hilton now.

[00:05:14]

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Beverly Hilton.

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yeah, Beverly Hilton in Beverly Hills [ph].

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Well, I certainly will go see it. That sounds fascinating.

LEONARD KAPLAN: It is. I [inaudible] very unusual pieces, but they're always very silly, in a way.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Well, you love things, I know—

LEONARD KAPLAN: Oh, yes.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: —because now, in addition to having your studio here, you have an antique art shop.

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yeah.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: And I could hardly wend my way back here, there were so many fascinating things around to look at.

LEONARD KAPLAN: And I've been doing that for, oh, 15, 16—15—at least 16 years now. I—there are very few collectors that don't have something that came out of those shelves somewhere, including a lot of colleges and—because I was always interested in ancient things.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: And the application of them to architecture, particularly, and the [inaudible].

LEONARD KAPLAN: Some of it's very good sculpture. [Inaudible] a lasting quality, because it's still around.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: And you said that you had had pictures in the Laguna festival for 15 years, too.

LEONARD KAPLAN: More than that.

[Cross talk.]

LEONARD KAPLAN: —when it was first opening, and then after the war. Right after the Second World War was when it reopened, and ever since then I've done the backdrops. I exhibited paintings. I've acted in some of the sets, and things like that.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: What were you? In what picture? Do you remember?

LEONARD KAPLAN: Well, when I was younger, I used to pose as a Renoir [ph]. [They laugh.]

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Oh, that's interesting.

LEONARD KAPLAN: I think I was a caveman once, too.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: [Laughs.] That's pretty diverse.

LEONARD KAPLAN: Well, yeah.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Now, I remember the first person who told me about you was Mrs. Rockwell [ph] [inaudible] Desert Hot Springs, and her husband, I believe, was active a long time ago—

[Cross talk.]

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yes, Mr. Rockwell [ph], who I also worked with on the backdrops.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Oh, did you?

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yeah.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: And I thought, perhaps, he was on the Project.

LEONARD KAPLAN: That's Elaine Rockwell [ph], isn't it?

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Oh, Maria something?

[Cross talk.]

LEONARD KAPLAN: Oh, Maria.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Maria [inaudible]. And she [inaudible]—

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yeah, yeah.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Well, here—chronologically, I've jumped you way up ahead.

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yeah.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: We have you back at the settlement school, first.

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yes.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: In this Educational Alliance, and you did get interested in doing painting under Mr. Ostrowski [ph], there.

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yeah. Then, gradually—well, there was a Dean—William Dean Forsythe [ph], who was at the settlement house then. And Douglas Lockwood.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Are these artists?

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yes. Yes, they were both artists, and they were both WPA employees, I guess you'd call it. And then, where I lived down in Long Island, there were various art schools. In most high schools, there was—some of them were very advanced, because I remember studying with an artist by the name of Ben Wilson, and it was life-drawing, which was unheard of in public schools.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Oh, really?

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yeah.

[Cross talk.]

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Using live models, you mean?

LEONARD KAPLAN: Live models, yeah.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Well, that is unusual.

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yeah. So, to this day, I, more or less, still use live models and work in pretty much the same way, and I don't think I would have had the advantages of this, unless it was WPA. I always considered this a kind of renaissance where—well, being that young, at that point I assumed that the rest of my life would be, more or less, with the arts, and that encouragement at the very beginning of it was just great. That's about the way I feel about the WPA, that—

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: You mean you felt, at the time, you were on it that this was just going to be going on forever.

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yes, yes. And to this day, I can't believe that it hasn't. [They laugh.] But, for some reason or other, I've stuck, pretty much, with what I started then.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Well, I don't—I still don't understand just how you did get on it. You had been doing drawing [inaudible]—

LEONARD KAPLAN: Well, I worked with Douglas Lockwood, and—finally, and then we started working on the Henry Street Settlement house itself.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Was this a WPA project?

LEONARD KAPLAN: I think it was.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: The Henry what?

LEONARD KAPLAN: The Henry Street Settlement house.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Henry Street Settlement house. And was it a mural he was doing?

LEONARD KAPLAN: Dean Forsythe [ph] I worked with on some WPA murals, where he had actual jobs. And then the rest of it was—he worked also for the Settlement house, and I assumed that was a project of theirs, too.

[00:10:07]

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And, of course, you probably hadn't been near a mural before this, so you were getting training—

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yes, yes.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: —on that kind of work from him, at the time.

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yes, and then I worked in the Settlement house, doing murals there. And I'm pretty sure it was—WPA endowed [ph] the whole darn thing, because I remembered going and starting the Settlement house farm, which I understand is a big thing now. It was just myself and two other people, and we redecorated old farm houses, in the—from the actual painting of the—well, constructing and painting the buildings, and redoing murals in the Settlement house farm.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Who was the other man with you? Do you remember?

LEONARD KAPLAN: Douglas Lockwood.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Oh, that was Douglas.

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yes, and Dean Forsythe [ph], also a painter, was doing murals, and I was helping him, at the time, too. And I was paid—I'm almost positive it was a WPA project, because I was paid through them—through the Settlement house. [Cross talk.] Eventually.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Well, that—I'm sure that with your work here, you do a lot of

decorating in addition to selling the antique things, don't you? Isn't that part of it?

LEONARD KAPLAN: Well, I did. I did. I don't decorate anything. It's more or less collector's pieces and decorative pieces—various things [inaudible].

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: And were you on the easel project at all?

LEONARD KAPLAN: No. I wasn't. I taught children, did decorative murals, and—

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Did they have a school at the Project center? Or how—

LEONARD KAPLAN: At the Henry Street Settlement, yes. It was a school.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: That must've been an interesting experience, to be relaying what you were learning to them, or did you like teaching?

LEONARD KAPLAN: Well, it was fun, yeah. I mean, you couldn't teach very young students very much. [They laugh.] We, more or less, took care of them. And well, there wasn't much teaching, actually.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: More a care center?

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yeah. And the life-drawing classes, I seemed to be very good at it, so I was, more or less, teaching that for a while too. Life-drawing.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: One—how did you find out it was ending? Do you remember any of those things that happened at the end of it? I gather you were disillusioned, since you'd expected this to go on.

LEONARD KAPLAN: No, well, let's see. I'm trying to piece it together. I remember the whole thing stopped for me, and I can't remember whether it was the Second World War or what it was, but everything stopped. [They laugh.] I just sort of drifted out of the Henry Street Settlement house, and I can't remember exactly—I just left that whole—well, the Settlement house, plus the job I had, and more or less, did other things.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Well, you were only 13 or 14 at the time.

LEONARD KAPLAN: No.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: If you were more than 22 when it was over in—

LEONARD KAPLAN: When was it over?

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: —'45, was about the end of it. Oh, 23. I'm subtracting wrong. No, you were in your late teens.

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yeah. I was about 18, 19.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you remember any—

LEONARD KAPLAN: Because—that's right, I got off—the service. That's what put me [inaudible].

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Oh, correct.

LEONARD KAPLAN: That's why. I was in the service. I think I was 19. I can't remember exactly, but I think that, more or less, ended everything for me.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: You do any artwork in the service?

LEONARD KAPLAN: No. I was in the Seabees [CBs]. I didn't last very long. I did artwork. I drew people. I was in Kraushaar Gallery and I was sending out drawings of camps and things like that, but I got so sick of it that I didn't do too many drawings.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Would you mind spelling that gallery? I don't know it. K-A, or—

LEONARD KAPLAN: K-A-R-A-U-S-H-A-R [sic].

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Thank you. That's in New York?

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yeah.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: And did the Seabees land you in California, or is that how—

LEONARD KAPLAN: No, no.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: —you happened to come here?

[00:15:00]

LEONARD KAPLAN: It was in Williamsburg. No, just a question of living in New York and getting a new overcoat, or coming where it was warm was about the same price. [They laugh.] And so I got married when I was 20, 21. I got married and said [inaudible] price of overcoats or living in California, so we picked California.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: You've been here ever since?

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yes. These three blocks, and traveling. When I was working for Walt & Beckett [ph], I was traveling all over the country, doing all kinds of things.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: It must have been a fun experience.

LEONARD KAPLAN: No, very difficult. [They laugh.] It isn't—can I have one of these cigarettes?

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Oh, of course. [Inaudible.] Did you do any work on the Westwood [ph]—big department store? [Inaudible]—

[Cross talk.]

LEONARD KAPLAN: I did Stonestown—I did Stonestown, Bullock's Stonestown up in San Francisco. Goldwater Store—I did a lot of work in the Goldwater Store in Arizona. And there's innumerable ones which I've forgotten, which I did pieces and bits for, but each one of these [inaudible].

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Mm-hmm.

LEONARD KAPLAN: And it wasn't usual commercial work. I mentioned whale bone, or anything. This was in the beginning of, oh, about—I guess it's 13 or 14 years ago, and there aren't too many artists working on these kinds of things, so we couldn't—

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Well applied decoration was quite new to the architect, at least—still coming out of that international style.

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yes.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: That we didn't have much of.

LEONARD KAPLAN: Very simplified, and so you could do very individual things. I remember I was working with Tony Rosenthal, Mary Rolling [ph]. And actually, I think at least the three of us—Mary Rolling [ph] did a [inaudible] which is like mosaic, and Rosenthal did bronze, and I did most anything, from silverwork to whale bone sculpture to polyester resin—almost anything they particularly wanted done.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Rosenthal was the sculptor. I'm saying this for the tape.

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yes. Yeah.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: The sculptor about whom the greatest modern art controversy raged in Los Angeles a few years ago, for his work on the city hall [inaudible].

LEONARD KAPLAN: That was a Walt & Beckett [ph] project.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Oh, was it?

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yeah, I'm sure of that. Yeah.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: That certainly died down, don't you think?

LEONARD KAPLAN: That's where [inaudible] mosaics that—

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Another one who what?

LEONARD KAPLAN: I forget. There was another artist who actually did mosaics for that police building. I can't remember his name. There isn't much to do with the Project, but it was a start at the Project—it gave a lot of artists.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Well, very likely, you wouldn't have been able to go on with it if the Project hadn't come along. I mean, you certainly wouldn't have been able to paint.

[Cross talk.]

LEONARD KAPLAN: Well, that's about the best training I've ever gotten is through those years.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Really? Well, that's amazing.

LEONARD KAPLAN: I've picked up most everything else myself. I had a—the Art Students League, I had a scholarship there, but I didn't manage to last there too long, because the service took me out of that scholarship. I think I was there six months with Reginald Marsh. And the service sort of plucked me out of that situation very quickly.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Do you remember any of the other artists that you met on the Project in New York, or any interesting things that happened? Anything like that? I know it's a long time ago and I haven't any leading questions to ask you, which makes it—

LEONARD KAPLAN: Well, I remember working doing backdrops for a theater group, which I, more or less, just wandered into.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Oh, really?

LEONARD KAPLAN: I wasn't employed, but I just—there was such great freedom, and there was so much going on, with the theater and painting and murals and the—what's that New York museum? The Museum of Natural History had just tons of murals and—right throughout the place—the lunchrooms and [inaudible] around was painted by some WPA artist.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: I'm going to interview a couple next week who both worked on that Museum of Natural History, on the façade out in front.

LEONARD KAPLAN: Oh, the front?

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: It sounds interesting. It was an artist—no, an archeologist who discovered the Mexican calendar stone.

LEONARD KAPLAN: Yes.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Who did the translating, and they worked with him on the murals on the outside of that.

LEONARD KAPLAN: [Inaudible.]

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: [Inaudible] be fun to hear about.

[00:20:00]

LEONARD KAPLAN: [Inaudible.] Well, see, mine was just the tail end, but living in that period—I had that brief job for Henry Street Settlement house, and—but most of the actual things I've learned were in the Project.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, that's certainly interesting, and I appreciate your telling me about it.

LEONARD KAPLAN: I didn't know whether you wanted to interview me. I should've written to you, but I've been—actually, frankly, I just—well, actually, it's a month ago—I was just at the Mayo Clinic trying to get my back fused and things like that. So I've been trying to organize

this business so I don't have to be in it to [inaudible] so, that's one of the reasons why I didn't write to you.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: I understand that. I appreciate your taking the [inaudible].

LEONARD KAPLAN: You're welcome.

BETTY HOAG MCGLYNN: Thank you.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]