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Oral history interview with Max McCarthy,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Max McCarthy on October 15, 1964. The interview was conducted by Mary Fuller McChesney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Max McCarthy's wife, Jean McCarthy, is also present.

Interview

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: I'd like to ask you first, where were you born?

MAX McCARTHY: Oh, uh, up in Merengo, Wisconsin.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Merengo? How do you spell that?

MAX McCARTHY: M-E-R-E-N-G-O

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: M-E-R-E-N-G-O, hm-m-m? Wisconsin. What year was that?

MAX McCARTHY: 1896

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Where did you receive your art training?

MAX McCARTHY: Oh, I picked it up mostly by myself, but I did get some at that school in Santa Monica, in high school, and I spent a couple of months at Mark Hopkins. They called it the Mark Hopkins Institute.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Here in San Francisco?

MAX McCARTHY: Yeah, it's the California School of Fine Arts now.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Now it's called the San Francisco Art Institute. Changed names three times.

MAX McCARTHY: Did it? (Chuckles.)

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: And, Jean McCarthy, you were also on the WPA project for a short time. I'd like to ask you, where were you born?

JEAN McCARTHY: Rochester, New York

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: And what year was that?

JEAN McCARTHY: 1900

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: And where did you go to art school?

JEAN McCARTHY: Mechanics Institute in Rochester

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: And was that the only place?

JEAN McCARTHY: Well, I went to some of the WPA classes, and I'm trying to remember some of the life classes,.. a Victor... Oh dear, De...

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: DeWilde?

JEAN McCARTHY: Yes, Victor DeWilde.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: When he was teaching here in San Francisco.

JEAN McCARTHY: And uh, is he here now?

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: No, I said, you went to his class when you were here in San Francisco.

JEAN McCARTHY: Yes.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Max, how did you first get on any of the government sponsored art projects?

MAX McCARTHY: Well, that's a pretty tough question. (Chuckles). It's so long ago. I don't really remember the

first project I was on. I worked over on Treasure Island during the Fair, worked on a project over there. That was a mosaic project. I was polishing marble over there.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: That was the Treasure Island Fair?

MAX McCARTHY: Treasure Island.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: The Golden Gate International Exhibition. Let's see, that was in 193...

MAX McCARTHY: nine.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: 1939. Who were you working for there?

MAX McCARTHY: I don't remember if that was Sargent Johnson's project or somebody else's project. But I also worked on a project at the Aquatic Park there, chippin' marble for the mosaic down there.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Let's see, that must have been earlier.

MAX McCARTHY: Yeah, that was earlier.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Before the Fair.

MAX McCARTHY: Yes.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Let's see, were you on the Sculpture Project?

MAX McCARTHY: Yes, I was on the Sculpture Project, but of course I was just the handyman around there, you might say.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: But you weren't on a job of your own?

MAX McCARTHY: No, I didn't have any projects of my own.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: I see, I just wondered if there was a separation between the sculptor and the painters. I thought there was ... so then you were on the Sculpture Project?

MAX McCARTHY: Yeah, that's right.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Well, let's talk about Aquatic Park first. You said you were chipping stone there. Exactly what job were you on?

MAX McCARTHY: That was the mosaic there. That's tile for that mosaic that's outside.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oh, the one that Sargent Johnson designed?

MAX McCARTHY: Yes

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: It's up on the back there. What kind of tile is that made of?

MAX McCARTHY: I really don't know what kind of tile, but I think it was that Gladding McBean tile.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Gladding McBean.

MAX McCARTHY: Gladding McBean tile, I think. I'm not sure about that.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: A commercial ceramic tile made in San Francisco.

MAX McCARTHY: Yes.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: What did you do?

MAX McCARTHY: I chipped to prepare it to go on when they put it on the surface, you know. When they cement it on. I prepared the back surface.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: They didn't have to be cut though, did they?

MAX McCARTHY: Yes, they had to cut it too. They had a very good tile cutter there. He was Moroccan, I think. His name was Zambie, or something like that.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Zambie, do you know how to spell it? I think I've heard about three versions of this name, and have never had it spelled right. I think Sargent called him Mohammad Zenzed. You couldn't make any sense of it at all. So then you worked with him, with his Moroccan man, with the tile cutter, and with Sargent?

MAX McCARTHY: Yes, that's right, yes.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: How long were you out there?

MAX McCARTHY: Oh, not so very long because, I think, from that project we went over to Treasure Island.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oh, hmm, what was the project at Treasure Island, was this another mosaic?

MAX McCARTHY: No, this was marble. It wasn't a mosaic. No, it was mosaic, yeah. But I mean this wasn't that project down on the Federal Building. We were over there just to demonstrate, but, let's see, they weren't doing anything for the Island.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oh, I see, you were in the Art in Action.

MAX McCARTHY: Art in Action, yes.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: And did you cut the mosaic, cut the marble too?

MAX McCARTHY: No, I just polished it.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: How do you do that?

MAX McCARTHY: Water, and two -- two pieces of marble.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oh, you don't use power tools to do it. You do it with water and what? And you rub the stones in water? Who else was working with you on it?

MAX McCARTHY: A fellow by the name of Blake.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Do you remember his first name?

MAX McCARTHY: No, I don't. I don't remember names. Names all slip away from me.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Do you remember any of the other people working with you at Aquatic Park?

MAX McCARTHY: Jan Sabre.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: What's his first name?

MAX McCARTHY: Jan.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oh, Jan Sabre. Was he working on the Island project too?

MAX McCARTHY: Yes, he was my assistant.

JEAN McCARTHY: He lives out in the Mission now, doesn't he?

MAX McCARTHY: No, over on Potrero.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Were there just the two of you?

MAX McCARTHY: No, there were several there, I just don't remember names.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Did you know any of the painters working at Aquatic Park at the same time you were there?

MAX McCARTHY: No, I don't remember any of them,.. but Hiler.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Hilaire Hiler who did the main mural? Why was that mosaic never completed?

MAX McCARTHY: Oh, they just started on the Defense. They just continued WPA and went to Defense.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oh, I see, so were you transferred then?

MAX McCARTHY: What's that?

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Were you transferred then? Or you went over to Treasure Island?

MAX McCARTHY: Oh, no. I had been off the project long before then.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: How long did that Aquatic Park project last? Must have been quite a long time.

MAX McCARTHY: It lasted up into the time WPA switched over to Defense.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Must have been after Pearl Harbor then.

MAX McCARTHY: Yes. No, no, they started Defense before Pearl Harbor.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Do you remember what year that was?

MAX McCARTHY: No, that was probably 1937. They were 2 or 3 years, I think, on the defense work, building up the defenses before the war starts, before we got in.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: John Sacarro mentioned that he was transferred from some project to a blueprint reading school.

MAX McCARTHY: On to defense work.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: I was wondering how that worked. Did you continue as a government employee?

MAX McCARTHY: The government, they started a training program for defense work, teaching people to be machinists or blueprint readers, ship-builders, shipwrights, training them that way so they would be ready for the war.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Did many of the artists go on into this project?

MAX McCARTHY: I think quite a few took it up, yes.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: How long were you over on Treasure Island demonstrating the mosaics?

MAX McCARTHY: Oh, about 3 or 4 months, I'd just imagine. I don't know for sure.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Do you remember the other art projects you were on?

MAX McCARTHY: Well, I was on one. I think it was a kind of Parks project, a museum project. They had a place at the Embarcadero there, in the Ferry Building. I was working on a Mount Diablo Museum Project for a while.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: What did you do down there?

MAX McCARTHY: I was modeling horses, mostly, -- horses and things. And doing relief map work.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: What was the idea of the total project? What were they making for the Museum?

MAX McCARTHY: They were making the little demonstrations, the little relief maps.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Did they call them dioramas?

MAX McCARTHY: No, regular relief maps, not diorama, no, of the historical background and the Indians and prehistoric history and that.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: How many of those did they make?

MAX McCARTHY: I don't know just how far they got with that.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Was this a very large project? Were there many people there?

MAX McCARTHY: There were quite a few. Ten or so.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: What sort of materials did you use to make these relief maps?

MAX McCARTHY: Uh, we used this plastic clay.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oh, Plasticine

MAX McCARTHY: Yeah, clay to build it up and we used wax for the figures. Not exactly sealing wax. It wasn't quite that hard, but that kind of wax composition.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oh, and that was the final material they stayed in?

MAX McCARTHY: No, they painted it after that and probably put a sealer over it.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: How large were they? You made horses mainly, how large?

MAX McCARTHY: They were little, little tiny figures.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: About 3 or 4 inches?

MAX McCARTHY: Yeah, about 2, 3, 4 inches round I'd guess.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Where is this Mount Diablo Museum?

MAX McCARTHY: Oh, I guess it's over on Mount Diablo someplace. That's right across the Bay, near Concord.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: I know the mountain, but I wondered what town it was in?

MAX McCARTHY: I don't know whether it's Concord or not, or whether it's a place up on the mountain there.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: You've never been over to the place to see the things?

MAX McCARTHY: No, I've never been over to see it.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: How long did you work on this project?

MAX McCARTHY: Hmm. Two to 3 months, I guess.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Do you remember any of the other artists who were working with you there?

MAX McCARTHY: Well, Paul, ... what was that fellow's name?

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Paul...

MAX McCARTHY: Can't, can't recall. Oh, and let's see, ...no I can't remember any names.

(All talk?)

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Did you work on any other government art sponsored projects?

MAX McCARTHY: No, that's all.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: It was those three projects then, -- Treasure Island, Aquatic Park, and the Museum Project, the Mount Diablo Museum.

MAX McCARTHY: Yeah. Well, Sargent Johnson also had me work for the Washington school.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: The George Washington High School.

MAX McCARTHY: Yes. Fooled around with the clay for that guy.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: You helped him make the clay...

MAX McCARTHY: Mix it up, yeah, prepare the clay, keep it in shape.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Where was that done?

MAX McCARTHY: On 14th Street, right off of Mission there.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Talking about Sargent, he couldn't remember how you built the forms to put that clay up on. Were they wood forms, or what?

MAX McCARTHY: Wood forms.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Wood forms. Then the clay was put in 3 or 4 inches thick?

MAX McCARTHY: Yes, maybe not quite that thick, probably up to that, 3 or 4 inches, I guess.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: And your job was what? To put the clay into the forms?

MAX McCARTHY: No, I just took it and kept it in shape, you know, keep it moist and pliable.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Must have been quite a problem to keep that amount of clay damp.

MAX McCARTHY: No, I wrapped it up in gunnysacks, you know, and kept the water in that way.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Did you help Sargent do the final forming?

MAX McCARTHY: No, I never put any clay up or modeled any.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: And you didn't help with the mold? I guess they made casts of that, then cast it in the cast stone, didn't they?

MAX McCARTHY: I think they did.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: But you weren't involved in that. Do you remember any other sculptors working out on 14th Street at the time you were there?

MAX McCARTHY: Uh, well, Lemon. Lemon was out there at the time. David Lemon.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oh, David Lemon, was he on the project? You know, I didn't even think of him as being a sculptor of that period.

JEAN McCARTHY: One name leads to another.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Well, you know, it's peculiar that his name hasn't come up yet, because he exhibits around and is well known, but nobody mentioned him. Was he one of Sargent Johnson's assistants?

MAX McCARTHY: Uh, I think,.. No, he had a project of his own, I think.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oh, he did have?

MAX McCARTHY: I think so, yeah, and then there's Portonova (Giovanni), I think.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: He worked with Sargent Johnson quite a bit. Whatever happened to him?

MAX McCARTHY: I think he must be dead. I used to see him around here when I first moved over here, but he disappeared.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: He was an older man at the time, wasn't he?

JEAN McCARTHY: I wonder what happened to Thelma Johnson Street, a young Negro artist, remember? I think she helped Diego Rivera? She worked on a big mural with him. She went to Mexico for a while. We tried to look her up when we went to Mexico, -- that was quite a few years ago. We thought she had a lot of talent. I don't know what made me think of her now, but she was awfully good.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Yes, Mac (McChesney) remembers her very well, and often wonders what's become of her too. She was a dancer, I understand.

JEAN McCARTHY: Oh, there was her dancing, something I'll never be able to understand. At dancing she was very poor.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oh, was she?

JEAN McCARTHY: Yes, and she had a lot of talent when it came to painting. Remember her, Matthew?

MAX McCARTHY: I remember her, oh yes.

JEAN McCARTHY: It was just too bad.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: When did you first get on the government art projects, Jean?

JEAN McCARTHY: When?

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: When and how?

JEAN McCARTHY: Oh, how? Well, I applied. I told them I needed the work and the money, and I was doing color work and commercial work. And they wanted someone in the Lithograph Department to color lithographs and also a series of flower subjects. I did all the color work on the flowers.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: When you say you did color work before commercially, what did you mean exactly? Did you work as a color consultant?

JEAN McCARTHY: I worked for Velvetone, and I worked for some of the photographers. I did airbrush work and worked in stencils and that sort of thing.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oh, I see. Velvetone, -- is that a paint company?

JEAN McCARTHY: It's a silk screen.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Silk screen.

JEAN McCARTHY: And it was mostly color work, airbrush. I did a lot of airbrush work.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Do you remember what year that was you went onto the government project?

JEAN McCARTHY: Heavens.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: That was here in San Francisco, wasn't it?

JEAN McCARTHY: Oh, yes.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Was Ray Bertrand head of the Lithography Project then?

JEAN McCARTHY: Oh yes, that's right. He was my boss.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oh, he was.

JEAN McCARTHY: Where is he now?

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: I've been trying to locate him and I believe I've found a Ray Bertrand with a lithography company in San Francisco and I think that must be the Ray Bertrand. But I haven't found out yet because I sent two letters out and they both came back.

JEAN McCARTHY: Well, then, he's in business for himself.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: I think it must be Raymond Bertrand, the lithographer.

JEAN McCARTHY: It must be. ["It was not." - MARY FULLER McCHESNEY:M]

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: I'll have to telephone tomorrow.

JEAN McCARTHY: It must be. Oh, I'd like to see him again.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: I'll mention you to him. I'll mention your name when I speak with him. Who else was on the Lithography Project?

JEAN McCARTHY: Let me see. Uh, oh, quite a number of people. Well now, Marjorie Fakens.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Fakens?

JEAN McCARTHY: 'Course, she's married to Sabre now.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Well, maybe you can tell me something about what you actually did after the lithographs were printed. Did you then do the coloring?

JEAN McCARTHY: Yes, either by hand or by airbrush, and I'd cut all the stencils. And blow them in, -- blow the color in.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Whose work did you color?

JEAN McCARTHY: Well, quite a number of artists, but most the time I was busy doing flowers, -- um, working on a flower series. Different ones and mushrooms and all sorts of plants.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Who designed those?

JEAN McCARTHY: Different artists. I can't remember her name, the one who did the flowers.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Was it Alberte Spratt? Shirley Staschen mentioned having worked on a series of flower drawings, coloring them, or something. California wildflowers which I believe were colored by hand.

JEAN McCARTHY: I did uh...

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Was that for Alberte Spratt?

JEAN McCARTHY: Not, it was another name.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: What were those series done for, -- the school?

JEAN McCARTHY: I believe so. I think it was.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: And they did local mushrooms too?

JEAN McCARTHY: Yes, poisonous and edible. And other plants, I'd forgotten, different plants. Probably it was for the school or the library. I can't recall what it was for, and it was mostly all color work.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Where were their headquarters at that time?

JEAN McCARTHY: Um, what was the school? Well, first we were on Potrero Hill, for a while, remember? And then we moved to the school, somewhere in the Avenues, was it 39th? Way out near the border, near the beach, I'd forgotten the name of the school. I can't remember what else I did, some other work. Oh, I did some work on a big photographic mural in City Hall. I think it was for Wolen's office. Yes, I'm quite sure it was.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Whose office?

JEAN McCARTHY: Wolen.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Who was he?

JEAN McCARTHY: He was, oh you know, there in the Civic Center.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: That's W-o-l-a-n?

JEAN McCARTHY: W-o-l-e-n, I believe.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: You don't know who he was or what he did in the city government?

MAX McCARTHY: He's the treasurer or something. Tax collector.

JEAN McCARTHY: I think so. He was in the tax office, I believe. He had a huge mural. Forgotten who did the photography, but we had to do a lot of retouching when they put the thing together, so I did the retouching on it. I did that years ago so they had me do all the black and white and gray retouching so it looked put together.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: It was put up in sections and then you retouched them there.

JEAN McCARTHY: And I had to retouch it so it looked all one piece.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: What was the subject of this mural?

JEAN McCARTHY: I think it was a scene of the city.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: San Francisco.

JEAN McCARTHY: Yes.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: How long were you working on that?

JEAN McCARTHY: Oh, I worked on that a few weeks. That was a lot of fun. And it seems I did some other retouch work on some other mural, but I can't remember which one that was now. But it was mostly color work.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: About how long were you working on the Lithography Project?

JEAN McCARTHY: About a year.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: About a year? Did you ever do any lithographs of your own?

JEAN McCARTHY: No.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Some of the lithographs made were actually printed in color, weren't they? Or were they all colored later?

JEAN McCARTHY: Some, not very many, some were. Yes, they did quite a bit of them in black and white.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: And then you'd make a stencil, and then spray the color in.

JEAN McCARTHY: Yes.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: You don't remember the artist whose work you did this for?

JEAN McCARTHY: Well,...

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: I was thinking of George Gaethke's color work.

JEAN McCARTHY: I did some color work on his lithographs.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: He had some colored lithographs of animals that looked like they might have been done in that technique.

JEAN McCARTHY: I believe I did that. It was all blown in. Yes, I remember. That's right, and some other artist, who was she? I don't think I can remember.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: You worked on these at the lithography headquarters while you were doing them?

JEAN McCARTHY: Yes, they had a few others doing color work, but I've forgotten their names.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Were there many people down there in the headquarters?

JEAN McCARTHY: Quite a number.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: I guess it varied, different artists came and went. The artists would come in to do lithographs, apparently did them, and then they would not be there after that.

JEAN McCARTHY: It was interesting.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: You weren't over at Treasure Island yourself?

JEAN McCARTHY: No, just at the school, and for a very short while up on Potrero Hill. I also did some color work for a number of other artists. If I could only remember. And one sounded like McChesney. It was all abstract, and I cut the stencils for it and did about 25 or 30. I don't know where they all went to. Often wondered.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: But not silk screens.

JEAN McCARTHY: No, I cut the stencils and blew them in and some I worked in with the hand stencils, you know. You get your real stencil brushes, you know what they're like? Oh, you don't? Well, I think I had a set of stencil brushes that came from Europe and they were lovely and soft and worked beautifully with color, water color. They were my own, I remember that, and I used those. SO I either blew the color in or just rolled them right in. You can get quite an interesting effect that way. I know in Europe years and years ago, they did lots of color work that way, with the hand stencils. That's gone now. It's all printed now.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Were most of your artists friends at that time on the WPA project?

JEAN McCARTHY: I guess so. I guess they were. What about Helen Conser? Was she on? Was she on the Project?

MAX McCARTHY: I don't know.

JEAN McCARTHY: Can't remember whether she was.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: What was the last name?

JEAN McCARTHY: Conser.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Conser? Oh, it starts with a C - Conser.

JEAN McCARTHY: I'm trying to remember if she was on the Project. She may have been. Could be. I suppose after

you're gone we'll think of dozens.

MAX McCARTHY: Oh, yes.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: That always happens, I'm afraid. You weren't ever able to do any work on your own, independently, on the Project? You never got a commission?

MAX McCARTHY: Well, I did, finally, towards the end. I did a head of George Sterling in plaster. But I did one in plaster. That's about the only thing, on my own, that I did.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: George Sterling, the California poet.

JEAN McCARTHY: Yes.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: He was a contemporary of Jack London's who I guess was a friend too.

JEAN McCARTHY: Max lived next door to him up on the Hill. Isn't that interesting?

MAX McCARTHY: While I was on the Project I did this sculpture.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oh yes, this is cast ceramic. You made a mold and cast it and glazed it. It's an interesting piece. This is from the 30's then.

JEAN McCARTHY: But I like what he has down in the basement. I really like that. You'll have to see it.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Yes, I'd like to see it.

MAX McCARTHY: Quite a story about that. One day...

JEAN McCARTHY: It may not be good for over the tape.

(All laugh.)

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Where did you make this? On the Pottery Project?

MAX McCARTHY: I made it on the Project, but it was not for the Project.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: There was a little difficulty about that.

JEAN McCARTHY: It's grotesque, but I think it's a good piece.

MAX McCARTHY: Yeah, it tells a story.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Did you know many people who were on the Pottery Project? John Magnani was the head of that as I recall.

MAX McCARTHY: Oh, no, this wasn't on the Pottery Project. I didn't make this there. I just made a cast, a plaster cast. Later on I made a mold.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oh, later on you made the mold, then poured it in clay and fired it. Oh, I see, I thought you actually worked on the Pottery Project.

MAX McCARTHY: No, I didn't work there.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: But the plaster bust of Sterling you did while you were on the WPA project. Where did you work on that?

MAX McCARTHY: In my studio, 15 Hotaling Place.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oh, you had your own studio, but you were on WPA time. Was the bust going to be used by WPA to be displayed somewhere around the city?

MAX McCARTHY: No, I don't think they had any particular place for it. It was kind of like a studio project, you know. A lot of artists did what they called easel paintings, you know, and did whatever they wanted and turned them into the Project. This was on the same principle.

JEAN McCARTHY: Something just came into my mind, and it slipped again. Can't remember now.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: When you did this portrait bust of Sterling, did you have to get permission from the

head of the Project to do this on the Sculpture Project?

MAX McCARTHY: Well, I got permission from Allen, who was the head of the Project.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Joseph Allen.

MAX McCARTHY: Yes.

JEAN McCARTHY: What happened to him?

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: He's living in Arizona, has been there for quite a while. How did you do this portrait of Sterling? Did you work from photographs?

MAX McCARTHY: Photographs, yes.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: But you said you had known him.

MAX McCARTHY: Oh, yes, I knew him. He used to come up on the Hill quite often.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Where, on Telegraph Hill?

MAX McCARTHY: Telegraph Hill, yeah. I used to live up there.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: When was this?

MAX McCARTHY: Oh, about 1924. Well, he used to visit. Quite a lot of bohemians were living up there. Every Saturday night they'd have a party of some kind and Sterling used to be up there. He used to come up for the parties. He was the life of the parties.

JEAN McCARTHY: Can you imagine! I bet he was.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Did you know him very well?

MAX McCARTHY: Yes, I knew him quite well, yes.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: He must have been an interesting person.

MAX McCARTHY: He was very interesting, yes.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: What was the name of the street you said that he visited?

MAX McCARTHY: Alta Street.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: A-l-t-a.

MAX McCARTHY: Course I lived down further in Napier Alley. It used to be Napier Alley then.

JEAN McCARTHY: Was Puccinelli on the Project?

MAX McCARTHY: Yes, Puccinelli was on the Project, on the Sculpture Project.

JEAN McCARTHY: I think he's living in Florence now. I heard someone say he's living in Italy.

MAX McCARTHY: Dave Slivka was on the Project too, the Sculpture Project.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Did you have much contact with any of the other sculptors?

MAX McCARTHY: Well, Puccinelli and Dave Slivka used to live right above me, in 15 Napier Alley.

JEAN McCARTHY: 15 Hotaling Place.

MAX McCARTHY: 15 Hotaling Place.

JEAN McCARTHY: And Dong Kingman...

MAX McCARTHY: Dong Kingman lived there.

JEAN McCARTHY: Shared the back of the studio. But he's become very world famous, very famous.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: What was Puccinelli working on in the Project days?

MAX McCARTHY: Well, he did a big tiger.

JEAN McCARTHY: Leopard.

MAX McCARTHY: Leopard or tiger or some kind of cat. It went down to, I think, Salinas High School.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Carved in stone, or what?

MAX McCARTHY: Yes, carved in stone. Black marble.

JEAN McCARTHY: Or it could have been a black panther, maybe.

MAX McCARTHY: Panther, yeah.

JEAN McCARTHY: I believe that was what it was, a black panther. I think so.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Did you have any contact with Bufano while you were on the Project?

MAX McCARTHY: Oh, yeah, I used to see Bufano once in a while.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Did you ever work for him?

MAX McCARTHY: No, I never did.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Looking back on it, how have you felt about your experiences on the WPA?

MAX McCARTHY: Well, you want my feelings about the WPA?

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Your candid feelings.

MAX McCARTHY: Oh, well, I thought it was a very bureaucratic outfit. I think that's what spoiled the whole thing, I think. The artists were bribed and people on it who got to be in important positions got to be bureaucrats, you know, and they tried to make a name for themselves and weren't interested in the public welfare as they were for making a name for themselves.

JEAN McCARTHY: Human nature.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: You mean artists, or administrative personnel?

MAX McCARTHY: The administration, and the artists got to be pretty much the same way. They got to be the same way. They were bureaucratic too. They got jealous...

JEAN McCARTHY: Not all of them.

MAX McCARTHY: No, I mean those who got to be in any big position seemed to get that way.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: The ones that got the big commissions and could hire other artists got to be that way?

MAX McCARTHY: Yeah, they wouldn't think of the people's needs so much as they'd be thinking of making a name for themselves, I think. And I think the Project was to take care of the people's needs first. The idea of the Project was that, I think.

JEAN McCARTHY: Well, the Art Project, I think, was very important, -- that they produced and showed the world what they were doing. And many of them did.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Well, I think, actually the idea was to revitalize the arts, and to do that they could encourage the artists. But if they were put in a situation where they felt that they were stifled by bureaucracy, this wouldn't be very encouraging to talent, I wouldn't say.

MAX McCARTHY: No, it wasn't.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: I've heard this from other people too. It depended, I think, on the type of experience you had on the Project. It depended on the sort of people you worked with and really was a matter of luck, I guess, about which project you happened to be assigned to.

JEAN McCARTHY: And then again, it was a wonderful opportunity for some of the artists that were unknown.

MAX McCARTHY: Oh, a lot of artists, they became well known, but I mean that's where bureaucracy shows up. They favored people while they tried to discourage others. Now the case of Jenny Lewis...

JEAN McCARTHY: Oh, yes. She died. She's gone. But she was quite wonderful, and the poor little thing, -- I remember the first day she came to the Project with great big holes in her shoes, quiet and proud and full of talent, and they started making fun of her. Well, I don't want to mention names here, but they made fun of her. She was sort of an odd little thing. And suddenly she was discovered by, what's his name? Cahill? He came in and looked at all the lithographs and sorted out all of her work only, and in fact, they had tried to fire her a few times. I thought it was dreadful because she was rather odd, but quiet and bothered no one. And he said, "I want every one you have of this artist. And I want to give her a show in New York." Which he did. And, of course, immediately, Allen and a few others there began to show her a little bit of attention and they weren't going to fire her after that. And they did things like that. After she died,...

She died in a very tragic way. She went to visit her brother up in the mountains, somewhere up in the mountains, and got lost in the snow. She lost her way and she died of exposure. And it was very tragic. She came to see us at the studio, remember? Just before she left to visit him, and showed us a few of her paintings. I wish I had taken them then. She wanted to give us some of her work. We told her that she must keep it because it would be important some day, and what happened to it we don't know. And I knew nothing about it. I had lost my boy and I was in a dreadful state myself, so they told me nothing about it until later on. Max knew about it, but I didn't and how I did weep when I found out. But she was so talented. She was wonderful. I don't know what happened to all her work, but Cahill, of course, dropped by and went through all the lithographs and picked out all this odd little person's work and let the others go by. Those were some of the things that happened on the Project.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: It seems, from the people I've talked with, that it was more difficult for a sculptor to go ahead and do their own work than it was for painters. There seemed to be a lot more painters working on the Easel Project independently then. They were given materials and allowed to do their own work. Whereas a sculptor seems to have been in a different situation. Why was that do you think?

MAX McCARTHY: Well. I really don't know. I guess they didn't have a place for a sculptor to be shown. And a sculptor takes a long time and he produces very little in a long period of time, you know. I guess that is the reason. Get more paintings, and things like that, -- guess that's why the sculptor had a harder time on the WPA than the painters did.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Do you think there'd be any way to avoid this problem with bureaucracy?

MAX McCARTHY: Oh, I don't think so, until the whole period has changed. The whole economic system has changed. You analyze this economic system and everything is done communal, like a communistic system. One element is missing and that is justice, you see. The people who are the most important are the agricultural workers. They feed us, and they get the least pay. Those who produce nothing, they get the most out of it. So, you see, there's no justice under this here system we have. And if you read history, you see that in the Middle Ages, when the Church was in power, that they used this here "heretics" to persecute people. And now they use this here term "Communism" for the same reason. I think that the only solution is to have a new system.

JEAN McCARTHY: This is going over the air, dear. Would you like a cup of coffee?

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Yes, that would be fine. We were just discussing, Max, some of the problems that arose during the WPA days, and you mentioned that you felt the chief problem as far as the artist was concerned was the bureaucracy of the Project, which developed both among the artists and the administrative personnel.

MAX McCARTHY: That's correct, yeah. I think that was one of the chief problems. And I think the other problem was the jealousy between the artists in getting bigger and better projects for themselves. Like, Bufano wanted some more money in his project, and Sargent Johnson wanted more in his. All this was concentrated too much on individuals, rather than spreading it out. The work should have been spread out, and more artists allowed to participate in their own projects, rather than the personal, single projects.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Well, it was certainly true of the Sculpture Division in the city. Aside from Bufano and Johnson, there weren't very many sculptors who got commissions at all.

MAX McCARTHY: No, there were a lot of other sculptors on the Project, but they had no projects of their own. They had to work under the existing projects that were going on at that time.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Do you think it might be a good idea for the government of the United States to sponsor artists again?

MAX McCARTHY: Well, I think if the artists would organize themselves to utilize their own art, they would be better off. Under the circumstances, I think that the same bureaucracy would creep in again under government control. I think that the artists should work together as we saw in 1929, which brought on this here project.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: On what?

MAX McCARTHY: 1929, I say. Up to that time our chief philosophy was individualism, and Hoover used to harp on that "struggle of individualism" topic of his, and we saw the results of it. We saw the breaking up of the whole economic system, I would say. The people should learn that it's a bad philosophy. They should work together rather than individually, I think.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: You know, it seems a bit difficult for artists to cooperate with each other though.

MAX McCARTHY: Well, they still live under that philosophy of rugged individualism. They have to get rid of that philosophy before they can work together. I think that is the only solution of it.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: You think it would be better to wait for a change of philosophy, rather than have the government sponsor the artists?

MAX McCARTHY: Well, no, I don't think so. I think the government could help a whole lot, but I think these artists should always keep in mind that it's not the ultimate answer. I think that they should have this in mind so they could fight against this here bureaucracy that's liable to creep in, and that they should get away from this here idea of individualism. I think that's the wrong philosophy entirely. The human race is one and it should be considered one. We need all these elements to exist. If some of these elements are missing, why we are in trouble. For instance, if we got no water, we wouldn't be able to live, and I think that that's the way with the human society too. They have to cooperate, not think of individuals. Individualism is more or less like a cancer, I think. Takes away from all the rest of society.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: During the WPA days were you a member of the artists union?

MAX McCARTHY: I was a member of it, yes. I think I was. Yeah, I was a member of that.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Do you think they could have done anything to control the development of bureaucracy? On the Project?

MAX McCARTHY: Well, I don't think they could at that time. I don't think the general public was educated up to the point to realize what was really happening, and I still think they're not educated up to the point to realize what is happening. I think that we live in a materialistic world and it's a very wrong kind of philosophy to have. We point at Russia as being a very materialistic country and something to be avoided, and yet we hold up all our wealth to be admired.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: There's quite a contradiction there.

MAX McCARTHY: Quite a conflict.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: What kind of an influence did the WPA have on your career as an artist?

MAX McCARTHY: On my career as an artist? Well, they started me in every way they could, I think. I went to the hospital to get an operation done and, of course, being as they had a rule that after 3 weeks or so they were to drop from the Project anybody that was away,.. so they took that opportunity to drop me from the Project.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oh, really?

MAX McCARTHY: Yes.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Oh, you had some pretty bad experiences with them. Then you reapplied?

MAX McCARTHY: No, I went down to the Mount Diablo Project after that. I got on that.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: That was separated from the Art Project.

MAX McCARTHY: Yes, that was a different project.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Parks and Receptions, I guess.

MAX McCARTHY: Parks and Receptions, yes.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Did you have any trouble while you were on the Project about being harassed by

social workers? Did they ever bother you?

MAX McCARTHY: Oh, well, when I put in a complaint about being dropped, they did send somebody around, finally, after I had gotten on this here Parks and Receptions Project, in the meantime. But they wanted to know what the trouble was.

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: Do you have any other thoughts about the WPA?

MAX McCARTHY: Well, you can't take WPA or anything out of the whole system, the connections. You have to use something as a gauge. I think that the WPA was still harassed by the attitude and the philosophy of the economic system. That, really, a lot of people didn't really want to see it succeed. That the big industrialists and people who complain about taxes and things, they harassed it as much as possible too.

JEAN McCARTHY: Are we into politics now?

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: WPA politics. Thanks very much, Mr. McCarthy, for giving me time for this interview.

END OF INTERVIEW

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