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Oral history interview with Perle Fine, 1968
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Perle Fine on January 19, 1968. The interview took place in New York City, and was conducted by Dorothy Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing Perle Fine in New York on January 19, 1968. We're working at your studio at 58th and Third Avenue surrounded by some of your recent work which includes paintings and paintings combined with collage elements in wood. And so I think we might as well begin with your early life, where you grew up, and anything about your family and your childhood that would seem to have a bearing on your having become an artist. Or even if it didn't.

PERLE FINE: Well, it's interesting because almost nothing had a bearing on my becoming an artist. I was almost born at sea but I made it to Boston. I was born the first of May, 1908. My family lived there for a little while. Then came to a small town, Malden, Massachusetts. My father was a farmer, a dairyman. Unfortunately, I was not a boy, but I had to do a boy's work for him. The family was really quite poor. But we never knew it. We had a marvelous childhood. We always had lots to eat, lots of fresh good milk, cream, cheese, butter, everything. I never knew how poor we were. But I did know that I worked like a man—like a boy everyday before and after school just as long as I had to.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Doing what kinds of things?

PERLE FINE: Oh, washing bottles, doing whatever there was to be done in the house and the barn, washed the floor in the kitchen and threatened anyone with a shotgun if they dared to walk across it after I washed it. But that's going pretty far back. I guess what has a bearing on my interest was that starting almost immediately in grammar school at the time of the First World War, besides saving peach pits, I did posters and started winning little prizes and getting encouragement that way. So that by the time I graduated from high school I knew very well that I wanted to be an artist. There was no one in the family who was an artist. My sister was a very fine pianist. I studied piano at one time but begged off to do what I wanted to do. So it was up to me to find some way to get to an art school and learn to draw and paint and so on. There was a school in Boston called the School of Practical Art where I got a job as a bursar in return for my tuition. But I didn't know what my duties were. So I immediately sent receipts out to everyone who should have gotten a bill. But the people receiving them were brighter than I was. They all came in and paid their receipts. But at that school I learned how to do little newspaper ads and so on and learned all the requirements for that and made my way as well as learned to draw from the model and paint whenever I could. But that couldn't last very long. I knew that that was the end and that there was no place in Boston at the time where I wanted to study. So I came to New York. And the first place I studied was at the Art Students League with Kimon Nicolaides. I guess perhaps you know him.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, indeed.

PERLE FINE: He was a wonderful teacher. I got a prize in his class. But I lost interest there because at that time I had heard of Hofmann through Vytlačil who was also at the Art Students League—Vaclav Vytlačil. And I found my way to Hofmann's lectures and evening classes. But I still had no way of making a living.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were what?—in your early twenties by this time?

PERLE FINE: Well, I was about 22, yes, in my early twenties. So having had some of that training in commercial art I thought if there was some way that I could just make barely enough to subsist on I would study fine arts. So I took to doing some shoe drawings for Bonwit Teller, for Bergdorf Goodman. I'd do about one drawing a week. At that time one could live on what one could make on one or two drawings. I found out very quickly that the better the store the less money you made because, you know, they would have one good model and the Duchess of Windsor would come in and buy twenty pairs in different colors and sizes. So there was no money to be made there. But that really has very little bearing again on the business of studying art. But I guess we're jumping right into the study with Hofmann which really I feel was the start of my life as an artist.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You hadn't up to this point had close friends who were artists?

PERLE FINE: No.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were pretty much a loner?

PERLE FINE: Yes, I was. I met my husband at the grand Central School of Art where I went before I went to the Art Students League for a short time thinking that I could be a story illustrator and a painter at the same time. But what I found out very quickly was you can only be a painter and nothing else if you're going to be a painter. And that story illustration is something else. I did study painting with Pruett Carter with a view to doing that kind of thing up until that time.

DOROTHY SECKLER: If you do something else it shouldn't be in the art field. It should be in some unrelated area.

PERLE FINE: Exactly. Yes, that was absolutely true. So there was that necessity to separate painting from just about everything else. And that went right along with the feeling I had about the artist in isolation from society anyway. I never felt part of society as long as I—

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's interesting. Can you account for that in some way? Or do you know what that related to?

PERLE FINE: Well, it had to do with just about everything that was expected of one as a person, as a woman, certainly as an artist. Because one had to feel absolutely free to go in whatever direction at whatever time one needed to do it. There could be no strings attached at all. I knew that painting didn't mean a matter of painting from 9 till 11 in the morning and doing something else. Because you might not want to paint at 9 o'clock. And as it worked out very often it took me, I'm ashamed to say, the whole day to get to the point where I knew what it was I wanted to paint. It would be maybe 3 or 4 o'clock and I might only work for a couple of hours on it. But I had to have that free time to think and to walk or to do anything that I had to, to sort of become part of what it was I wanted to do.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You mentioned I don't know whether it was the feeling of being a sort of nonconformist or a rejection of society as it was set up.

PERLE FINE: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You said you were aware from childhood of this.

PERLE FINE: Well, for instance, society demands parties, the celebration of everybodys birthday with its attendant gifts for which I could never make enough money to give people the things I wanted to. And so I just knew that what was right for about everybody else wasn't right for me. And it always made me sad because one feels drawn to society as well as to be withdrawn from it. So I started painting by myself in a little studio, a little cold water flat that I took directly across the street from where the Hans Hofmann School was. He was at 51 West Eight. We were at 52.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you married at this point?

PERLE FINE: Yes. We were married in 1933 I think. So we took two cold water flats very, very inexpensive. I think they were about \$18 at the time, and they raised the rent all the way up to \$25. And one of them was kept completely free and I worked in that. It was just fine. It was in the rear of the building so that it was very quiet. And we lived in the other. Everyone said to break through, but the whole idea was to have complete separation. And all my ideas were worked out in that studio. And when I was absolutely frustrated with not knowing where I stood or what I had to do, for the sake of inspiration, I would go to the Hofmann School.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You didn't go regularly?

PERLE FINE: No, I never went there regularly. I never like working with a group, in a group at all. I just couldn't think. I know it's contrary to what so many people, certainly the Hofmann group, did. Because I remember there were women who studied with him for 18 years—he taught for a good many years and when he told them he was closing the school they said, "Well, you can't do this to me. I've studied with you for 18 years."

DOROTHY SECKLER: So you went when you needed stimulus?

PERLE FINE: Yes. It's very hard to recount just how many years I studied with him but it was over a period of 4 or 5 and that included some study up at Provincetown and here at 52 and 51 West Eighth Street.

DOROTHY SECKLER: This had been through the thirties then pretty much?

PERLE FINE: Yes. I was trying to figure out—I'm very bad at dates—but I think it was from about 1936 to 1938 or 1939, somewhere around that time. I know that at the time I stopped going there, I think, was at the time that France fell. That was close to 1940, wasn't it?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Around then I think.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Perle, before we get too much involved with your response to Hofmann I think it would be a good idea to clarify what kind of painting you had been doing before you had the contact with Hofmann. For instance, when you were going to the League had your work taken any particular direction? Were you interested in landscape or figurative painting predominantly, was it somewhat abstracted or very largely realistic?

PERLE FINE: Well, it wasn't abstract at all. I felt that one should have a thorough grounding in academic painting which is what I thought I would be getting at the Art Students League. And since Kimon Nicolaides was the best painter and teacher there I thought I would get it from him. I got a number of things from him that I've found have never conflicted with what I learned afterwards. And I think perhaps the most important thing I learned from him was what three-dimensional painting really was. Until actually trying to do it in his method, which was using brown wrapping paper and painting with black and white oil on that to the point where the figure almost looked like sculpture coming out of the wall, I never really knew what three-dimensional painting was. Of course I had to overcome it later.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

PERLE FINE: But at least one had to know what it was in order to overcome it and still of course the Hofmann teaching of the three-dimensional is translated into a two-dimensional picture but without that other dimension it's very thin.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

PERLE FINE: So that was an important thing that I got from Nicolaides. Another interesting thing that I got from him was a way of sketching. I think perhaps he's best known for this, his quick sketches which were almost scribbles. And I think they were more important than we thought at the time because these scribbles that we did which represented action drawing from the figure took on a meaning that Hofmann talked about very often after that, which meant simply that we went for the spirit of the action rather than the outlining of the figure, which was static and lacking in action. And I think that still holds strongly as a method of getting that kind of thing which is the basis of every good figure drawing no matter how slight it might appear to be when you first start to do it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Had you painted in color at this point at all?

PERLE FINE: Yes. In my studio. It was very interesting because everything that I did seemed to be a catalyst for the next thing. And looking back at the paintings that resulted from a need to create this or that or something with color or something that was more formal everything seemed to follow very closely what was happening in the whole art world. In other words, with Nicolaides we were encouraged to go to the Metropolitan Museum and make copies, not strict copies for the sake of copying, but simply to find out from whatever attracted us to do copies, the spirit of the thing behind it which made it so great. And for one reason or another I was attracted to the Rembrandts and copied a number of those very carefully. My mother still has them. It wasn't a hidebound thing I was after but some marvelous inner feeling that existed in those things. Which had a great deal to do with the approach, the feeling, you see, which again was very much the thing that Hofmann taught and that all great art has and here was the basis of it. But when I worked like Rembrandt, you might say, and when I was through I would look at it and say, "Why a brown painting? Why isn't there any color?" And so I'd say well now I'll set up a still life here and I'll make the most colorful painting I could. So, as I'd make a colorful painting then I'd see that it had no beginning or end, it had no structure. And so I said, well now, to get this I would have to be aware of it and work perhaps in a more pointillist fashion in which I could control these color areas from one end to another. So I did something in pointillism. And then I looked at that and thought why do they have to be that small? Why can't they be a little larger these little dots, why can't they be as big as an inch, you see? And so before I knew it I was working in planes. Which is exactly what was happening in the history of art, the Impressionists and the Expressionists and the Cubists. And then of course the planes of color I couldn't control at all. And so I said well I'll work it out in limited color, you see. So I worked a number of these things with browns, grays, blacks and perhaps a little green or blue or something like that. And in that way I was able to control. But, of course, as I was doing this, as I said, I did go to the Hofmann School where still lifes were ready and waiting to be done. But I had come to the class with an art idea, with a pictorial idea, you know, of what I wanted to express.

DOROTHY SECKLER: May I ask you one thing here, Perle. What artists did you admire before you came into the Hofmann class? Since you went to museums and so on I assume you were aware not only of Rembrandt but also I suppose of the moderns. Had you looked at Matisse and so on? Van Gogh?

PERLE FINE: Yes, I looked at Matisse and loved him but I didn't understand him. But I did seem to understand Cezanne and I love Cezanne. I still do. He's one of my favorite artists. And Renoir. And certainly Picasso. And Braque. Not knowing why I liked them I was drawn toward them. But in every case I feel that almost every artist that I was drawn to was French. I became a Francophile. I not only loved French art, I loved everything French

from then on.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It's interesting that this was the period of the thirties, the Depression period when a great many American artists were on W.P.A. and going through all the range of variation from having started with regional and American scene painting and then going on to social protest. This doesn't seem to have touched you at all?

PERLE FINE: No. You see, because I had come from Boston and I didn't know anyone in the art world here. And I did try to get on the W.P.A. But I thought to be honest with the government I should have a telephone in my apartment so that if anybody could use me to do some commercial work I'd have a phone. So I was investigated and as soon as they found out I had a phone they said I wasn't eligible. So I never got on W.P.A. Plus the fact that I didn't know the social protest artists. Probably if I did know any I might have gotten in there. But a number of the people from the Hofmann School were on it. Lee Krasner, who became Pollock's wife, William Freed, Lillian Orlofsky—I'm trying to think—oh, a number of people in the class did work for the W.P.A. But I didn't have too much respect for it at the time because they seemed to take old paintings out of their bins and pass them off this way.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I just wanted to clarify the point.

PERLE FINE: Yes. No, and I didn't get to know many of the artists until after I started having shows. I had the first one-man show at the Marian Willard Gallery; the first two one-man shows there.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Roughly, what year would that have been? That was in the forties, wasn't it? The later forties?

PERLE FINE: Yes. I would have to check on that because when I left the Hofmann School I went to the Guggenheim Museum. I got some scholarship money which just about paid for paints and that kind of thing. And that went on for about 3 years. And during that time I had the show at Marian Willard's. And then to the Nierendorf Gallery where he subsidized me. So I was able to paint all the time.

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is jumping ahead of our story—

PERLE FINE: Oh, I see.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It's all right. We can weave back and forth in time very easily. But perhaps it would be interesting to talk about the first paintings that you showed and then we'll trace back and see how you got there.

PERLE FINE: Yes. Well, after leaving the Hofmann School—well, of course this was happening all the time I was at the Hofmann School—I realized that there was no such thing as semi-abstract painting; that one couldn't be semi-abstract any more than you could—well, it's like saying I feel a little bit strongly about something, you see. Because for a thing to be abstract meant to me that you had to feel strongly enough about it to turn your back on realism and do everything necessary in an abstract way to put across a feeling which meant being totally abstract or non-objective.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And yet Hofmann wasn't always.

PERLE FINE: No, he wasn't. He wasn't at the time. But shortly after that he became completely non-objective in what he showed. And shortly after that he began painting a great deal more. But I think what had a very important effect upon me was the first group show at the Modern Museum. I'm trying to remember—it had such an effect on me I can't remember—Cezanne I think it was, Renoir; I know Gauguin was one but I like him less than some of the others; I can't for the life of me think of the fourth person. I don't think it was Matisse but it might have been. I'm almost sure it wasn't Picasso. But it was four great painters that really set me off.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was it Seurat?

PERLE FINE: It could have been Seurat. I think perhaps it was, yes. So I felt at that time that I could very easily have lost very much of what I felt was important if I went to the figure and continued to make it perhaps bite a little more, a little more abstract or something like that. And yet I was completely drawn to the totally abstract things and non-objective and I did a number of things like that. But my first one-man show at the Willard was I think strongly influenced by Miro. At least some of the critics said they were forms floating in space. And so, for that matter, were Kandinsky's forms floating in space. And a number of others. But it was a way of—and of course it was the first time I had ever put down on canvas anything like that. And it was very exciting to me to do it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: They were amorphic shapes?

PERLE FINE: Amorphic shapes, yes, floating in space.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How would you have arrived at them? In other words, I assume that you were not as much of a Surrealist as Miro was and that he was working in almost Automatism at that time.

PERLE FINE: Yes. These weren't Surreal at all. It wasn't in the realm of Surrealism. It was simply that I felt that I had learned from Cubism and I went deeply into that and did a number of paintings, some collages and some paintings from the figure very carefully studying distances between myself and the model and so on as a kind of experience. But I felt that they were bound, these shapes were bound to a single object which was the figure. And they were related to other things. But they were finally expressing the figure. And I wanted them to express a mood, a color, almost anything but anything recognizable.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And when you did that in Hofmann's class would he sometimes reprimand you?

PERLE FINE: I didn't do those in Hofmann's class.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You did them on your own?

PERLE FINE: I did them after I left. I did all the non-objective work. I think I would have felt inhibited doing them at Hofmann's. I don't know why because he never really said one could not work this way or that way. But somehow the study was almost all analytical there. And the synthetic Cubism even that I did was after I had left class. He was a very strong personality and I think he might have enjoyed it but I couldn't do it in class. I couldn't show it to him.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You didn't show it to him at the time?

PERLE FINE: I think he came to the shows.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. And did he approve of it?

PERLE FINE: I think so. I think he showed his approval by working in a non-objective way very soon after that because not only I, but a number of others of his students were beginning to work that way. And it was at that time that Pollock came into being too. Pollock was at the Museum at the time I was. You know he was a janitor.

DOROTHY SECKLER: At the Guggenheim?

PERLE FINE: Yes. He and Salemme.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And did you get to know him at that time?

PERLE FINE: No, I didn't. I got to know him through Lee Krasner who I knew very well. And when they came up to Provincetown I saw quite a lot of them there. Also at East Hampton.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How did you react to what he was doing?

PERLE FINE: Well, I didn't see very much of what he was doing until his first one-man show at Peggy Guggenheim. Oh, I thought it was very exciting. It didn't have very much effect on me, on my work. But I thought it was exciting work. I was pretty well determined to continue working these forms in space. In some cases the forms were going almost completely across the canvas so that it almost looked as if they were not—as if they were tied to the edges which is the all-over manner of working. But they still were free forms in space.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How would you have begun such a canvas?

PERLE FINE: With a color idea. With the idea of expression, something about some color or some color relationship. In fact, every canvas was with the idea of expressing something. And that still holds today. Even the canvases that seem to have absolutely nothing in them are expressing something, as you know, because that's part of the objective.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, would you have put down some calligraphic element first very freely? Or would you have studied it more carefully?

PERLE FINE: That's a very good question. What I did a lot of was sketches, complete sketches, that might have had absolutely nothing to do with what I was going to do later. But by the time I was through doing these sketches, which were in themselves quite beautiful little things.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Charcoal?

PERLE FINE: No. Usually in color. Then I would know what I wanted to do as a painting and I'd go directly to it as a painting. I wouldn't even sketch it out.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What would the sketches be like?

PERLE FINE: Well, they were like little paintings. They were complete paintings.

DOROTHY SECKLER: They were abstract?

PERLE FINE: They were abstract, yes. With some color. Color is always a motivation. Mixing color, you know, is a very joyous occupation for me because there was so much excitement at what would happen when one color was placed next to another. I mean aside from the visual Op or Pop that we have today. But there was so much more than just what came out of the tube.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were these sketches made very rapidly with the brush?

PERLE FINE: No, not so rapidly. They were done as carefully as I would go to a painting but in a smaller size, sometimes in notebooks. And later on I did a lot of this with collage because it was so much easier to move them around in collage and to use paper that way. And that I could trace directly to Hofmann's tearing of paper and moving, making movements do things other than what they were doing before you did that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The collage elements would of course just be colored papers? They would not be newspapers or media elements?

PERLE FINE: That's right. Not at that time. I did do a number of collages in a very rakish manner when I was in school in which I used—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Which school do you mean?

PERLE FINE: The Hofmann School. Musical motifs, violin forms and all that kind of thing. I always felt that that was a breaking down of forms, the analytical study of what would happen. So that your question about—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, I was just interested in how it developed. And, as you said, then after several of the smaller sketches you would go directly to the painting and have a sort of a sense of what kind of shapes you would put down.

PERLE FINE: Yes. And what color I wanted, what color interested me at the time. And it is kind of interesting that at one point I found myself doing peripheral painting almost entirely. I remember that it was Gottlieb who used that word. He came to the exhibition I had. By that time I was with Betty Parsons. And he said, "Oh, everything is taking place on the edges, isn't it?" And I thought well, that's a strange criticism. But I took it as a criticism. And today everybody is doing peripheral painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, once you were into the painting would it go through a great many changes and reworkings? Or would it proceed very quietly and logically with very little repainting?

PERLE FINE: Well, after doing a number of little sketches I knew pretty much what I wanted in a large painting and it wouldn't take very much in the way of changes, but where it would take place it would be something very important from the point of view of holding the picture surface or overlapping perhaps some forms so that it would not represent perspective.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Would you establish a field of color first?

PERLE FINE: I did in a number of paintings, yes. In a lot of paintings I did establish a field of color especially those in which—and probably this had to do with Calder's objects moving in space at the time; you know, his sculpture which of course was strongly influenced by Miro, too.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

PERLE FINE: So that there was that feeling of air and space and objects moving in it. And yet, it had to be done in such a way that there was no sense of anything falling down structurally or any corner not solved or anything like that. So that that was always the guide and the color was the inspiration.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I suppose you'd study it a fair amount in the process of working, you know— ?

PERLE FINE: Yes. I had a studio in Provincetown for many years and I did a lot of painting in the summertime and I had the paintings around all the time so that one would tell me what was wrong with another. Well, one did have to study them. But I don't think you can work and study it at the same time. It's too inhibiting. I think you work and work and stop and when you've stopped. You can't just—at least I couldn't go right back to working. I'd have to stop and really study it. I did in some cases analyze my paintings in a little sketches like diagrams that would say well this is what's happening and this is what I want to happen.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Your judgements were very much in terms of space and the total figuration as working together.

PERLE FINE: Yes, space, movement, form, and with always the big question of keeping, maintaining the first plane of the picture. Maintaining the first plane of the picture was very good right up until the time I decided well I've got to get a new plane of the picture, you see. And as soon as you get a new plane then you have a new problem. And problems became a problem, too. One could set oneself a bad problem, you know, one that had very little to do with something inspired, something that would not convey very much. So that I think that whenever I got stuck that way I would have to think of a problem that had to do with art and with what art was about.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you ever find things breaking into your paintings or turning up that were—well, sort of surprising and perhaps perplexing or that you had to decide how to dispose of them, you know, unexpected elements that would be intrusions to some extent?

PERLE FINE: Yes, I have experienced that. I'm sure you have, too.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Sometimes it turns out that they're good intrusions but discombobulating at the time.

PERLE FINE: Yes. Well, it's a very strange thing that in painting some of these intrusions sometimes seem like very real things, you know, very real beings, presences. And at other times they're phony and you know it. And that's what I meant when I said getting the problem that has to do with the subject of art. I think when you are abstract it has to have that as the subject. That is the subject behind it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, maybe we ought to discuss that a little bit. We may both think we know what it means but maybe posterity will take a dim view of it. As contrasted with one how would you define that subject of art?

PERLE FINE: Well, I think in a very general way there are two very great directions in art today and probably ever since the discovery, you might say, of non-objective art. And one is in the direction of the figurative, which is taking on many interesting aspects today, you know, making huge paintings of small objects and so on. And the other is definitely in the realm of the abstract and the non-objective. And I feel that my destiny actually lies in that direction. I can't for the life of me understand why that should be so because, as you know, I teach the figure and I love to work from the figure and to draw from the figure. I don't know that I like to paint so much from the figure, but to draw from it. But I've felt all along that there's something that's drawing me away from the figure and toward the other. I hope it isn't because of a didactic thing about the other. But I think it has to do with the unexplored. There's so much that's still unexplored in the realm of the non-objective and the abstract. And I feel that I sort of owe it to myself because I know quite a bit about it and I think because I do I want to know a little bit more. I want to know what I don't know. And so I feel drawn to that exploration more and more. I don't know whether I'll ever find anything or not, but it's so much fun to look for it. It's strange.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, I don't know why not. To get back to your first show with the organic shapes which, as you said, some critics thought they had some relationship to Miro, had you been very much aware of Miro?

PERLE FINE: Well, Hofmann loved Miro.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

PERLE FINE: But I didn't like him that much. As a Surrealist—I'm not drawn to the Surrealists very much and yet I recognize their importance. And I recognize that "surreal" is super-real and therefore very expressive. And because it's very expressive it has a very definite, a very important place in art. It also has many other things that—you know, the going against the grain, the going against everything accepted I think is a very attractive thing to me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you feel in your work that you were going against the grain? There are many Miro's, as exquisite as they are, that also have this kind of biting and slightly mean element in them. Would you have felt there was some of that element in your work at the time, too?

PERLE FINE: No, I think people saw Miro in me, in that work at the time, because they were forms floating in space. I think perhaps for the same reason that they saw it in Calder's mobiles. But that was the only relationship that I had to Miro. I never felt that I am that close to the Surrealists.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well then, it changed, I gather, in the next several years?

PERLE FINE: Yes. Well, of course the biggest change came about when I moved down to Tenth Street, down here. I left 57th Street completely. I don't know whether I was frustrated, but I knew that I was completely disgusted with the commercialism of it. And I didn't care whether I ever showed again or not. I just wanted to be among

artists. I wanted to see artists and I wanted artists to see me. So I moved straight to 90 East Tenth Street. With Bill de Kooning next door, and Esteban Vicente above him, and Lewitan and Milton Resnick. And you probably know that the Tanager Gallery came down there shortly after I did. And it really was a very exciting time for me. Because they would drop in. And I would love to have them. And everybody was very frank about my work. Lewitan, I remember, told me to do the smallest paintings I could possibly do if I wanted to be a success. And at the same time Milton Resnick had the largest studio in the neighborhood. I think it was one inch larger than Elaine de Kooning's; or it might have been the other way around—I don't know. There was all that kind of discussion. But it was a lot of fun. People were painting for the fun of it. And there was a certain release there that I didn't get anywhere else. And I think it had to do with these people dropping in that I found were real people.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did it strike you that you were in a way working in a rather different frame of reference from them?

PERLE FINE: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It didn't disturb you at all though?

PERLE FINE: No, it didn't disturb me but it made me want to try it. And I did. What I mean by trying it was painting with complete release as if I'd been through a session with a psychiatrist. So I really did that and had great fun doing it. There was, however, always an underlying structure in my work which was I don't think— but the idea was—perhaps it was—in that element of abstract expressionism. But I couldn't depart from it at all. I couldn't paint a picture that was a scribble.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But having done this thing with all full release, which I assume was a kind of scribble with color—

PERLE FINE: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Would you then tighten it up and rework it?

PERLE FINE: No, it wasn't done like that. You see the hand was led by something that no matter what I did became structurally stronger, you know, because I had had so many years of self-training in that field. So that all the pictures appeared to be very free but as you look at them you see they still have this very strong basic structure. And the complexes of color are very subtle. I think there's a good example of that in Harold Rosenberg's boss's office. He's asked me to loan it to him. It's a large painting in which incidentally I used metallic paper—I'm trying to think of what—I embedded the paper in the color and painted over it and just let a little of it shine through. I used that because I knew that the color itself, metallic paint, would tarnish. This has never tarnished. It remains—it's Reynolds Wrap. But in all of them after I did it I would automatically sit down and study what I did and make a diagram of what I did, a plan. And it would have the same expression as all the other things I did except there was a kind of very free handling and excitement about it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: A painterly surface?

PERLE FINE: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you then come to prefer the painterly surface and cultivate it?

PERLE FINE: Yes, I did. But again the thin line — this was kind of interesting because it kind of follows something that happened before in history. I felt that the thin line that I was using, that they all used, I wanted it to have more substance so like the Seurat dots that I had made larger previously and made into larger squares which became planes of color— here for the lines I used a larger brush and did a bolder stripe. And something else happened. It became a plane of color again. But it became more of a real thing, rather a synthetic approach than an analytical one. So in a sense history repeated itself for me in that way that the thin line — I feel I like both, you know, I like to work with the thin line but more in drawing.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You mentioned that the others were all using this thin line at that time.

PERLE FINE: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It seems to me that Harold Rosenberg mentioned to me some particular kind of brush or something that they had all used. Was that what he was talking about?

PERLE FINE: No. It had to do with the paint you were using though. We all used house paint.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, you were using house paint, too?

PERLE FINE: Yes. It was Nicolas Carone who told me about one that did not turn in color and which was very good. Particularly if the white is mixed with a little color, very little, so it still looks like white it won't turn, it hasn't turned. It's a small trick that house painters know, too. Because these walls are not white. They have umber or something like that in them so they stay this color. Whereas if they were painted white they would turn yellow in a very short time.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's interesting. Well, why would you have adopted house paint? I can understand why they might have in terms of the kind of rough, tough, never mind the edges, the refinements, but why would it have had an appeal for you?

PERLE FINE: Well, that was the only way to get the brush to flow in a certain way and to get enough pigment in there. You see I embedded this Reynolds Wrap in it; that was the method I used instead of gluing or something else which might come out. Today I imagine one could use plastic things that remain forever there. But this worked fine. Also I used sand in some areas and such things. I had done that before with the artists' paints. But this seemed to be part of that not caring.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Now where are we in time roughly at this period when you're in the same building with de Kooning and .. ?

PERLE FINE: We're on Tenth Street. No, I think it was before I got there that I met Bill on the street. He started to talk about the beginning of The Club, and would I join? I said I'd be delighted to. You know, we all wanted a place to go to. It wasn't always the best thing to go to someone's studio for one reason or another. So they started The Club.

DA This was the later forties then? At the end of the war?

PERLE FINE: No, it was later than that. I think it was in the fifties.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was it as late as that? Yes, I guess it was.

PERLE FINE: Yes. And I remember going to the first meeting and being greeted by Lewitan who immediately told me he was the only one that voted against me. It was supposed to be unanimous, whoever was brought in, but they allowed me to come in anyway. But that was an exciting time, the time of The Club.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you remember what would have gone on at some of the meetings that might have made a deep impression on you as far as a way of defining attitudes—some of it of course you've already touched on.

PERLE FINE: Yes. Well, I knew Ad Reinhardt very well. And I felt that he was very brave in his attitude and it was an inspiration to me that he carried out his ideas.

DOROTHY SECKLER: He wasn't anywhere near his big fields of black yet at that point?

PERLE FINE: Not quite. But I think he was doing his color, his big fields of color. Reds and blues. Very brilliant.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In large fields?

PERLE FINE: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I didn't realize that he—

PERLE FINE: I think he did the red series and blue series. It was shortly after that that he started to do the black series but not so black that you didn't see the crosses. Fritz Glarner was interesting. Once when he was up there he talked about his work and had some of his paintings there. And someone in the audience became very incensed and said, "What has this got to do with the war and suffering and just about everything else?" And he said, "It's all there!" Which was really very true. He had a difficult time.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And how about the firebrands that used to come?

PERLE FINE: Well, Kline was lots of fun. He was quite a hero to all of us. Because he was the one who stuck his neck out and let people take potshots at him. He had a language which was very strange.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. I remember an evening at the Museum of Modern Art where he talked about Shredded Wheat so eloquently for five minutes.

PERLE FINE: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And then Aline Saarinen came on right afterwards. I think it would be a terribly hard thing

to follow with a scholarly pedantic thing after this free discourse. He was wonderful. Well, these must have been very important growing years?

PERLE FINE: Yes, they were. And I think it might be interesting to tell about when I left Provincetown—I used to go up there every summer, you know—and came out to East Hampton. And I was really totally alone there. My husband was in the city. Well, the city had got me down, you know, the air, the fact that I couldn't live where I could paint, and couldn't paint where I had to live, and all that kind of thing. So we built a little one-room studio house out there in the woods. And it was pretty rough. The road wasn't even a road; it was just a firebreak through the woods.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was it at Springs?

PERLE FINE: At Springs, yes. It's on the other side of the road from Springs. This firebreak in the woods has Springs on one side and Amagansett on the other. We were in Amagansett, actually. But after putting up a shell I wouldn't come back to New York. And I didn't for eight years.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You stayed out there all year?

PERLE FINE: I stayed there summer and winter. And it was very rough. At first there was no heating system and the house was not insulated. So my husband said, "If you're determined to stay here I'll show you how to insulate it." Because he had to come back here to go to work. So he showed me how to put a ceiling up with the use of what's called a dead man, you know, a pole that holds one end of the thing while you work on the other. And I did it. I don't know how I ever did it and I probably could never do it again. So I worked there and I worked very well during all that time.

DOROTHY SECKLER: This would have been in the fifties?

PERLE FINE: About 1954. And I remember I was preparing for an exhibition at the Graham Gallery and had it all painted. I mean I had a whole exhibition ready to go out. And I decided it was not going to go. It was like a previous one, I think a little better than the previous one. And I had it all around the room. And I destroyed every painting there. I said well, it's good but it's not good enough. I learned more from that experience with no one there to say save this one; don't do this. I just had the feeling—and it was a very important feeling—that nobody cared really. Only I had to care enough to do this and to know that I could do better. And I had to destroy it in order for it not to exist. But I learned more from that experience than from anything that ever happened in my life. Because what happened after that was something that I can only say this: that I knew that feeling was the basis of everything that I had to do, and I knew that depth of feeling was important, but I didn't know that the degree of depth was the most important feeling, that the more you felt it the more you would do something about it, and the more you did something about it the more it would express; and that if it didn't have that depth of feeling, that intense degree of depth of feeling it would have absolutely nothing. And that's what came out: one of the best exhibitions I've had of these large bands. You couldn't look at the pictures without getting some kind of expression.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I think I remember the one at the Graham Gallery about that time. They were large paintings.

PERLE FINE: Yes. There were diptychs and I think one triptych that I had. I don't know if the triptych was shown there, but it was shown elsewhere.

DOROTHY SECKLER: To get back to the ones you destroyed, could you—I think you've given it in a general way—can you pin down what it was that made you feel that—what enabled you to recognize the fact that you had not plumbed quite as deep in feeling as you might have?

PERLE FINE: I wasn't sure. I knew that they were nice paintings, they were nicer looking. And I felt that was not enough certainly, that it was just another painting in this realm, in this kind of expression that I had chosen to work in, and that it was perhaps a little more interesting color. But it didn't have a sense of intensity about it and that anything I had to do—whatever I had to destroy would only make more intense what I had to say. I think that taught me so much about everything. I came out of it, whatever it was. If I'd had a psychiatrist he couldn't have done any more for me than just that. It was through the painting that I discovered what it was I had to do and that I could then really face coming back to the city and going out to teach. At that time I got a teaching offer first at Cornell and then here. And I went out with such confidence because I knew what I was talking about. And I have that feeling today, that I can face anything because I know what it's based on. And in teaching, of course, I try to imbue the students with that idea, too, that if you have something to latch onto, that you're sure is secure, and is sound, and is intense, you can't go wrong. Whatever you say is going to have some value and is going to impart to somebody something of what you have to say. It's a very strange thing that it should have had to happen that way. But there was no one to stop me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What would these paintings have looked like at that point? Just for our record.

PERLE FINE: Well, first of all, they lost some of their prettiness. They lost some of their meatness, you might say.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were they paintings in which the field of the canvas was in large divisions of color?

PERLE FINE: Yes. Before I had been working in these bands of color and composition and movement and so on, everything was happening in the painting. And I began to care less and less about that and I became more involved with what happened when I didn't care, or what happened when color wasn't as pleasant. I think pleasantness was the thing I was trying to destroy. So that something could be said by elimination. More is said by eliminating than by what I put in. And some of the canvases are quite involved. It wasn't entirely a matter of eliminating but it was eliminating the pleasantness about them.

DOROTHY SECKLER: They were not at this point simply in one or two bands? There were some other complications?

PERLE FINE: Yes. I had done a number of collages similar to them before. But the paintings weren't as strong as the collages I had done previously. And I imagine that one or two of the collages were the catalyst for this.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Do you find collages sometimes also a seductive means? I mean it can be beautiful in a kind of tricky way sometimes.

PERLE FINE: Yes. But I still base everything I do in the collage on something of feeling, but that feeling in collage is usually something about art again. It has very much to do with the interrelationship of art to that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And here again I want to be sure that I understand. It wouldn't have been something then—you wouldn't at any point have found a new stimulus from something—well, a reaction to the world particularly? Or a sense that—well, you, we're now living in a world of mechanics, or we're now living in a world in which everything is changing very radically, or out of space, or anything? No concept relating to what's going on immediately in your environment would impinge on a form, or your development of a form at a point, would you say? Or is it so subtle that it's difficult to trace?

PERLE FINE: Well, it is a rather subtle thing. It's an awareness of what is happening to, let's say, just a piece of white paper. When you do something to that white paper, when you put one or two forms on that white paper, that simple sheet of white paper can become one of the most beautiful things in the world if those forms are put in there in such a way as to involve every inch of that from top to bottom and from left to right. And that I was able to become aware of a little more quickly in a smaller painting, let's say, a collage than I was in a large painting. The fact that this happened in just one or two little planes of color on a sheet of paper made me every bit as aware that the placing, for instance, of a figure in a Rembrandt etching, the placing of a figure in *The Prodigal Son*, for instance, in a Rembrandt etching was every bit as important as the way he drew that figure. Which is something I never was as aware of as when I worked this out in collage and later in painting. So that another great truth about art was revealed to me in this way!

DOROTHY SECKLER: When you speak of setting down one or two shapes on a white paper you then are seemingly setting up a tension between them and the edges and so on?

PERLE FINE: Yes, exactly. The fact that I'm doing one collage which involved an awful lot of black in it that ended up almost as a pure white collage with just a fraction of an inch of black showing in it and the planes of paper that covered the black were of the same material, the same kind of paper as the paper that it was done on. So that there was that integration of the white plane and the background plane becoming a foreground plane.

DOROTHY SECKLER: This must become to some extent almost a reflex? If you are so intensely involved with the spatial—with the series of planes that get very organically related in space that when you begin—make any mark on a piece of paper and then a second mark, I mean you're drawing on a series of reflexes, then it becomes intuitive to you.

PERLE FINE: Yes, they're intuitive. And I can only relate them to a sound in space, a cry, or a chirp or something like that. It's a measured cadence in the painting and it's a very definite weight of tone, sound. But the effect that one or two planes—I always say one or two because it just gives you an example of what I mean—of these planes which could be, as I say, a figure in space, but it takes on a certain cadence, a certain measured rhythm that calls for another rhythm and it's another way of saying tensions and so on. But I don't seem to be able to convey in words what I mean by this awareness. I remember as a young student that I saved everything I could find on a number of artists that I loved. Of course Rembrandt was one of my great gods and I would cut out and save in a portfolio everything that he did. But I never thought to cut out the whole thing. I would cut out the figure. And I never could understand what made it so great, you know. And it had very much to do with what I had cut away. And after I had done a number of these things then I realized that where he put what he put was

so very, very important. Of course that's one of the reasons I think that some of the purists art which is prevalent today is important, that a number of young people are doing minimal art or whatever other name they give to it. But they've had academic training or not they are conveying a real important thought about art and about painting. And they may be limited in how far they can go. Later on they may not even know how important what they've said is. But the fact is that it does convey a pure feeling about rhythm and distance and cadence and movement and all that kind of thing.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you are not bothered by the emphasis on the objectness of what they do?

PERLE FINE: No. I can see it whether it's lacking in object or even in form it has that. I can enjoy what Matisse does as well as what is being shown currently on the scene today. I think it's very interesting to see in the drawings of Matisse, particularly his erasures in some of his charcoal drawings how he has erased and erased and erased and made a foot go further and further and further back in space just by where he put that foot. I think they reveal an awful lot about a very sensitive man's approach to the surface. But that of course is interesting in figure work. But this I think because it had this purity of position and placing and everything else that you literally had the spectator by the lapels and you say, "You may see this and nothing more," you know, so that you really do see it and you may feel, or may not, depending on the spectator's being conditioned or not to see.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In creating a shape, a larger one and then perhaps a smaller shape in a space where there is no perspective reference, would they be thought of as being closer or further away in terms of size very often?

PERLE FINE: Yes, I think so. I think one can create perspective and destroy the surface very easily with two completely non-objective objects or shapes on the canvas and I think you can destroy the whole original idea of respecting the first plane of the picture that way. I takes a practiced eye to do this properly I think.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Of course one might proceed into the realm of Gestalt psychology where they're experimenting with what we really grasp when we see. If we see two spots what do we assume about the relationship of those two spots.

PERLE FINE: I don't know exactly what Gestalt psychology means. I had a student who has written books on that. I had a class in Provincetown for a couple of summers. And he was very enthusiastic about what I was teaching. He said, "But this is it! This is exactly it! This is Gestalt psychology." He was a very poor student I must say. But he saw me after the session and he said, "I must bring you my masterpiece and show you because I'm sure you will understand." And he brought me the most horrible picture, surrealist, you know, the world in chaos. Absolutely nothing to do with painting. But it was like everybody's trouble involved in this. Is that what Gestalt psychology is?

DOROTHY SECKLER: I shouldn't think so.

PERLE FINE: Well, is it an interrelationship of— ?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, the tendency of the psyche to interpret things as whole units is part of it.

PERLE FINE: I see.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I don't know, I'm not an expert.

PERLE FINE: But I think I know it and then it seems to elude me every so often.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, if it isn't pertinent then you must just drop it. You know it's always when you get down to what one does in putting a dot on the canvas, you know, you could write a book about all possible ways of thinking about the dot actually.

PERLE FINE: That is an interesting attitude to think about in painting because I remember Juan Gris's discussion about how he could make out of the sun a spot of yellow. And somebody else said, "Yes, but out of a spot of yellow I could make the sun."

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's something to think about.

PERLE FINE: Yes, it is.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Speaking about Juan Gris reminds me of something else he said that may be relevant. He was always rather put off because whereas Braque could make this line with a beautiful kind of tremor in it, Juan Gris could only make it absolutely straight. And I wondered to what extent any person's nervous system may come into play in this matter of setting down one or two shapes with tension between them. Or to what extent the way you may set them down might even, let's say, in the same concept vary from day to day.

PERLE FINE: I think it depends completely on the person. That's what makes it very interesting. In fact, it's interesting to me that students given a very tired old problem will come up with such marvelous responses partly because they don't know completely what the problem is and partly because they're new people in a new world. That's one of the exciting things about teaching.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Who was it said that the history of art is the history of problems that are misunderstood.

PERLE FINE: Yes, exactly. Really what's pertinent and what I found makes life bearable for me is that I may be searching for something, I may even be finding it and not know it. And I may find something because of my determination to go in this single direction that may not have anything to do with what I think I'm looking for. Which is what happened to Cezanne. Of course I don't want to make any odious comparison. I know that he had an extremely hard time defining what it was he was searching for. And I laboriously translated an article that I found in a French magazine in which some reporter had found him on the scene at Mont St. Victoire painting and had finally gotten him to talk. And he would only reiterate the work "motif" over and over again. Now "motif" means something completely different in French than it does in English. And as I read it I felt that I interpreted it to mean a kind of order that he was making out of nature which is chaotic and panoramic. And the order that resulted from that on canvas was the motif or design or plan, or, you know, something related to the word "motif." But he certainly never expected to be the founder of Cubism or to go down in history doing that. But the fact that he was so completely sensitive to whatever was going on and sensitive to what was happening on his canvas and so dedicated to the determination to reveal something of what he felt; in other words, that he was so careful to do it brought out some things that he wasn't even—

DOROTHY SECKLER: He went beyond his own theories.

PERLE FINE: Yes, he went beyond his own theories, exactly.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. He writes a great deal about perspective and yet he became the founder of a school which destroyed perspective.

PERLE FINE: Destroyed perspective, exactly.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's something always good— to be able to go beyond your own theories. Well, when do you have sense of doing this? Or could you mention a couple— you did of course in the period when you destroyed the canvases. The period that followed must have been a period of sort of revelation, of going beyond what you thought you had wanted?

PERLE FINE: Yes. Did you ask "when?"

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, I mean just to explore it a little further it would be interesting. I was thinking that you went into a rather different kind of color at the time you said that was not as pleasant. Besides not being as pleasant what resources would you have been drawing on to get at that color? Do you remember how you arrived at it?

PERLE FINE: Yes, I do. I remember that after completing that second group of paintings that were shown at the Graham and other places I went to still another painting. I started it. And there was something that kept me from adding or subtracting anything from that painting. It was only a start and yet it had all the expression. I knew that anything more that I did to it would detract from it. I then again felt the importance of what one left out to be as important as what one put in, and what one put in took a place in a very telling or expressive way. I still have that canvas. I think it's important to see the connection between that one and the paintings which followed, which were using the rectangle or the square to a large extent. I have a record of about 58 canvases that were done by these means. They were not completely symmetrical. There is hardly one that is completely symmetrical. And it's interesting that one summer Dr. Conant came over with a group of his graduate students. We were looking at a lot paintings that they had slides of in their collection. And someone pulled out one of the paintings of this group. And somebody else said, "Let's see another." And before we knew it we had a whole exhibition of them there in the studio. And the students were absolutely amazed that it was only by having a number of them around that they could get the idea at all that the mood and the expression and everything seemed to come about partly through their lack of having experienced this before, because if they had they would have gotten it from looking at one painting or two paintings. But they had to see them all, one in contrast to another to see what a pink and, let's say, a tan and a green would do and what it evoked as opposed to some other color or combinations of color, and what effect, let's say, a very long horizontal painting had as opposed to some other shape. But in these paintings it became more and more a matter of eliminating so that could feel absolutely nothing but something unnamed, and unnameable, you see. There was no reference to anything. I remember the first years out on the Island. Bill de Kooning came into the studio and he made some nice remarks about the paintings and he said, "But this is all out of doors. It's what you see out here, isn't it?" You know, through a big studio window. And I said, "Well, yes, I guess so if you say so." Of course it wasn't, you know. But

to what extent that had impressed itself upon me I don't know. You know, sometimes the very black trunks of trees against the white snow and horizon lines. Certainly there is something very exciting about the country.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Have you ever noticed your color tending to change in relationship to seasonal changes?

PERLE FINE: Yes. Well, not so much seasonal changes as environment. The things I do in the city are completely different from the things I do in the country. The things in the city tend to be more cerebral, and in the country freer in color somehow and in form as well.

DOROTHY SECKLER: More open?

PERLE FINE: More open and more relaxed. In the city you become kind of introverted. But I think that I was determined in the series—I call them the "cool" series—that nothing should be felt except nothing, you know, except nothing, except space, if there is color—there has to be color even though there is no color; where there is no color or very subdued color that's what you felt. You felt something about it if the painting came off. I found that very few of them did come off, that there were an awful lot of bad ones, that it's a lot harder to do this, as you became more and more abstract and less and less definitive about it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When you ran into one that you thought was bad you would not then be able to make an adjustment of an edge or a color to overcome it?

PERLE FINE: No, I didn't try. I think there were technical difficulties there. I'd rather destroy it than try to paint over. I rarely paint over. If it was a minor adjustment like moving what appeared to be a horizon, or depth, in other words, to try to get more depth in it, I didn't mind doing that. But if it was essentially, let's say, a combination of colors that didn't do a number of things that a painting should do, hold its surface at the same time have a sense of depth and a sense of conveyance of some kind of mood, some kind of expression, even this expressionlessness was a kind of expression of something. And sometimes I expressed too much in that very similar form. It was a kind of nervewracking thing to do and yet a marvelous thing to live with, that at the end of the day you could really enjoy looking at a painting like that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I think that particular series justified the—I mean as horrified as one is at the thought of the destruction that preceded it what came out—

PERLE FINE: I didn't have any feeling about it. I probably would have if someone had been there to say, "let me have this" or something. But I didn't want any of those paintings to go out. I'd rather they had been complete failures. They were just a little better than something I had done before and that seemed like an awful waste of time in one's life just to do a little bit better and not accomplish anything.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, in that particular series, like the one you have here in the kitchen, certainly the edges do play an important part.

PERLE FINE: Yes. Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Had that been true of the previous ones?

PERLE FINE: Yes, I had been aware of edges ever since drawing from the figure, that the importance of an edge that is hard, that, you know, stops the eye short—this is the obvious thing in a figure, you can see that something dark against something light will stop the eye completely, flesh against something white here will be hard and soft on this side. So that you can see it in real life. But how it's used in a non-objective way is a completely different problem that is much more difficult to solve. But I worked both ways, you see. I worked, and nobody knew—least of all the critics who bawled me out for doing this in two ways—I worked with a completely hard edge on some, completely hard, so that that gave me an instant relationship to whatever was happening. Which was fine. It was a kind of easy what to do it. But it wasn't as easy as it looked because that color then had to do an awful lot of work. It was the color itself then that had to either allow you to go into the next color or not. And there are a couple of examples of this in two or three of the paintings that were done that way where it really works the way I want it to. It turns a form. It becomes three-dimensional. It does all the things I wanted it to just by the choice of color, because that was all that you allowed yourself to work with. And the other was interesting too because it was a little softer, a little easier to see the form in space. But in the other I introduced another problem in which I threw these forms off-center. That almost acted like a door opening with a hard or a soft edge either doing one thing or another and allowing you to see the painting in an interrelated way like the form making the space or the space making the form. So that it became a little more interesting problem because of that. But in a criticism I think it was Barbara Rose who said she couldn't understand why I did that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Throwing it off center?

PERLE FINE: Yes. She thought I had missed the whole point. I don't know what point she thought I had missed. She certainly didn't get the point that I was trying to convey. So that was that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were your colors at that time also—would they have varied in density in the field of color?

PERLE FINE: In the sense that they were mixed colors they were not transparent. Is that what you mean by density?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, as in a cloud where you see some part of it as fading off and others were it's thinner. Well, first of all, a more primary question: were you underpainting these colors at all?

PERLE FINE: No. I mixed the colors directly.

DA This isn't house paint any more, is it?

PERLE FINE: No, no. That was over when I stopped working physically that way. No, these are carefully mixed colors, thoroughly mixed and then placed on the canvas.

DOROTHY SECKLER: On the sized canvas?

PERLE FINE: On the sized canvas. And then studied to see what was doing, what effect it had upon me and what it was doing plastically, you know, how tensions were created with what appear to be something that had no tensions in them at all at first glance.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You had at this time no digressions of making other paintings where you would go in to more organic forms or more complex forms? Would you ever do that sort of thing just for recreation or change?

PERLE FINE: I think it's always exciting to work from nature and see organic form. But not in painting. I'll do that only in drawing. In other words, I will get some of these forms from nature, perhaps, and then translate them into whatever I want them to do into painting terms. But actually with these little wood collages which are the last things I've worked on, the most recent things, and which I'm still working on, there's a kind of excitement that I want to get that's conditioned by this recent group of paintings, the "cool" series. It's conditioned by that. I think the whole art scene is conditioned by what's shown whether we like it or not. And the minimal art, for instance, the minimal sculpture, we certainly can't look at sculpture the way we did before because minimal art exists in sculpture. It makes some of the most quiet sculpture look baroque, you know. And in the same sense, having experienced what I have in this cool series of paintings makes me want to get that same kind of quiet excitement in the wood sculpture or in the painting what I'm working on now. And it makes you again aware of something which I think we all have as nature that pulls in one direction or another. And mine I feel must be a quiet one because everything I've been drawn to has been a kind of lyrical tempo. So I feel that the newer works will have more and more of that something which Mondrian gave us. The importance of the vertical to the horizontal. And which Van Doesburg destroyed in a sense. He opened up something else which I think is valid but nowhere near as important as what Mondrian gave us. And I don't think I'll ever forget the lesson of Mondrian.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Has he been a later influence? Of course I realize that in Hofmann's classes he certainly had Mondrian brought in too, but sometimes you have a superficial acquaintance and then later it deepens.

PERLE FINE: He was a very deep influence on my life from the time I first saw him.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you meet him actually?

PERLE FINE: Yes, I knew him. He was a member of our American Abstract Artists. A very nice person. As I knew him, he was very sweet. But I thought he was really great in his essays and in what he had to say beyond what he did in his own work. His work only reflected what he said in his essays. But he really made us so aware of the importance of the vertical and horizontal. And I think in everything I've ever done you see a trace of that, in some more strongly than in others. I think that that was one of the big lessons I learned in expression, too, you know, when I destroyed this exhibition of paintings and started to base everything more importantly on the vertical and horizontal in the picture plane.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The ones you destroyed involved other movements as well as vertical and horizontal?

PERLE FINE: Yes. They involved all the things that I thought I was getting before. But the depth that I was able to achieve was much more through an awareness of how one could achieve it through the vertical and horizontal. The depth went from bottom to top, you know, and from left to right and so on. And I don't think we'll ever realize how important was Mondrian's influence and what he had to say in the history of art.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Of course he made us feel the vertical and horizontal as a kind of universal thing.

PERLE FINE: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You know, something underlying all experience and so on. I think the philosophical aspect was important, too.

PERLE FINE: Yes, it was. I'm trying to say it in some way that isn't visual. But this intensity that I was talking about that you could only get through the limitations of painting and the limitations of the size of the canvas. I don't feel at all the need to have a canvas come out of the wall or go tramping along the floors or anything like that. I think that what is going on today is a way of getting around—getting excitement. I think excitement can all be there.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I was wondering about that, yes. But in a sense the minimal artist— it sometimes seems as if that kind of adventure of getting out of the rectangle in another way—

PERLE FINE: It is exciting for just one session or one season. And then I just don't get anything from it a second season.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When you say "you don't get anything," you mean from minimal sculpture or from this painting that goes out of a rectangle?

PERLE FINE: I mean from a painting that makes new outlines instead of a rectangle or a square. I don't care very much about—

DOROTHY SECKLER: I thought that was what you meant. The thing I was trying to clarify to myself is, isn't it true that minimal sculpture, which I have certain sympathy with, is what you get to, though, once you start moving on the rectangle in a way?

PERLE FINE: Oh! I don't know too much about sculpture. I really don't. I only know a feeling that I get from it when I enter a room that has it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. There are of course so many different kinds.

PERLE FINE: Yes, exactly. As in painting I think there are charlatans and I think that they hurt the cause a great deal. I don't go along with a man who puts a board up against the wall and calls that sculpture. Nor do I get anything from it. I mean he may call it sculpture and it may very well be. But I certainly get nothing from it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I think that clarifies the situation. And this is something that really is a kind of battleground, maybe the battle hasn't been joined yet. But it always seems to me it is there implicitly.

PERLE FINE: Yes. I think its valid aspect is simply that art is something to play with as well as to work with. And if someone has decided that this is great fun, I'm going to do it; then somebody might get something from it. But what it gives later on— I'm not sure that there's anything so very profound about what it might add to the stream of art.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That brings me back to another question I wanted to ask: so many artists who were working with the vertical and horizontal in a very severe way were thinking about scale a great deal in terms of scale as environment, as in, oh, Rothko and M Newman and so on. Was that an important aspect of your work at any time? Did you feel the need to enlarge to the point where your color field would surround the spectator in any way?

PERLE FINE: Well, I did a few very large paintings that were in that show of the cool series and some which were, as I say, diptychs and triptychs. And they had a certain impact. But I don't feel that it's necessary to get a painting that large to have impact. I think that with the control of whatever the medium is you can get it, I always say, in a postage stamp size. You can pretty nearly too.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You're still thinking of the person looking at it and experiencing, projecting into it rather than standing next to it?

PERLE FINE: Yes. Well, I really think it's just as silly to say that you have to go way over across the street to see the painting as it is to say that you have to walk right up to it and be enveloped in it. I don't think you have to do either.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And today, of course, you're working in a rather moderate size?

PERLE FINE: Yes. I don't know what I shall do next. This is about as small as I've ever worked. I think in my show the paintings are something like 4 x 4 feet. But I've worked on a number of them that are 30 by 30. And it's very satisfying. And not necessarily as an object or as an easel painting or anything like that. It's just simply that you can experience the depth and the play that you need for someone to experience these things.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Now at some point of course you shifted from oil paint to plastic paint. What happened? And how did that come about?

PERLE FINE: Well, the reason for that was in these wood collages a sense of design was very strong. The motif was very strong. And there wasn't the necessity to have the full play that you can get with oils. Which I still love and which I still intend to use. So that since that was a secondary thing it was no trouble at all to put it no, paint over it whenever you needed to paint over it. It has its uses and its limitations as well. But it's a very useful thing.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You've never felt tempted apparently to use sheets of Lucite or, any of the jim crackery in a way that goes on nowadays. it's understandable, you know, to be fascinated by plastic and to want to investigate it.

PERLE FINE: Of course, yes. No, I don't feel that at all. I feel that the further you get into that the further you're getting away from painting. And I only had to experience doing these wood collages to know whether I wanted to do that or not. And this is as far as I shall ever go I think in something away from painting. Whatever it is I have to say I will say in paints and I mean in oil paints.

DOROTHY SECKLER: To come back to that very important show which I remember and which I thought was a very powerful show at Graham—what you call the "cool" paintings—how did you actually feel, and what kind of response was there when you had these on the wall and could see them all?

PERLE FINE: Well, I think I was perhaps a little bit ahead of my time in that. I think that if I had had this show about 3 or 4 years later it would have been—

DOROTHY SECKLER: What was the date of it incidentally, roughly?

PERLE FINE: I think it was 1961, which isn't so very long ago. But it preceded the things that are done today in this limited motif. So that some people were rather shocked that I should have arrived — Oh, you know, we forgot to talk about the painting that led to this. Do you remember I started to say there was one painting that I had started to work on and wouldn't work on for I felt that nothing I could add to it would express any more.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Yes.

PERLE FINE: Well, that painting I saved intact because it had all the elements which led directly to this series. It happened to be in black and white. I had planned to use more color on it, but just the start of it in black and white and the placing of it and these bands suggested almost this rectangle that lay on the canvas in a horizontal manner. And it was so expressive of that that I eliminated any of the lines which were bands of color which were beginning to be diagonally opposed to these. And there was the rectangle that I used immediately in the next several paintings that I made and one that I made in black and white which is sort of an inverted rectangle like that which I call the Big U. It's a black form going this way and it's directly taken from that so that everything that I had which may seem in many cases so different really ties in with what I've done before because it's there. It's just a matter of eliminating something and leaving that, or adding something to it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When did you do that one? The black and white one.

PERLE FINE: I never exhibited that at all.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But that was about a year before or something like that?

PERLE FINE: Yes, it was. I think I was working toward this because I was trying to simplify all the things I was doing. In other words, the big black one was a simple form. There was a lot of color in it but it all related to the black. So that when you looked at it first it looked like black. A rather ominous painting. And that discarding of any pleasing colors or bright colors or orangey colors that I had been using before that made it a painting again but not an expressive painting led me to believe that I wanted to do more of eliminating of color and contrast of color and so on. So that as I eliminated color the form became more apparent to me. As I found the form the form became simpler. And as it became more related to the vertical and horizontal, which quieted it down, it also became less of anything. So that if what I was trying to express was nothing, there it was; nothing had suddenly happened.

DOROTHY SECKLER: This black, the other tones related to black, and then would the rest of the painting have been white, or what?

PERLE FINE: Well, in that unfinished painting it was black and white, yes. It was black almost from a little bit above the center to the top and almost to the edge, so it was a very small matter of carrying that out just a little bit further. Then I found that working it in color helped me to see moods that could be created with the same

form. Of course the mood was also dependent upon where I placed that form, you see.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You then began working with, let's say, a pure block of color against the white or against another color?

PERLE FINE: Yes. I did everything. Because it was so exciting to me to work with this form and to find out that no matter what I did I had a quiet, expressive painting that didn't look like anything that I didn't want it to look like. Other people always find something in my painting that they thought I intended to be there, and swear that it is there, even though I didn't intend it to be there. But this excited me very much. I did some quite large paintings in this in which in some of them I used a field of color and then had other colors, you know, pulled back into space created by that form, sort of back and forth, all at first appearing to be nothing more than a rectangle or a square on that—

DOROTHY SECKLER: And yet you didn't use the primary colors as Mondrian had?

PERLE FINE: No. I didn't use the primary colors at all in this.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How do you account for the fact that you were not attracted to—of course Mondrian had done it—the vertical and horizontal of Mondrian?

PERLE FINE: Well, I guess because the problem was different. Then, of course, I think the last paintings he did were in a sense like Pollock's in that they covered the field. You know, they went from edge to edge. They made a kind of a plaid look, you know of the criss-crossing lines. Very beautiful.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In The Broadway Boogie Woogie?

PERLE FINE: No, not that one, but all the last paintings— No, the Victory Boogie Woogie was his last painting. No, these were small paintings. I think they are owned by either Janis or Harry Holtzman. They are bands of black and some blue, but a lot of them, a whole lot of bands of black and one band of blue so that you get a grid, the feeling of a grid, you know. But, no, I wasn't thinking in terms of Mondrian at all. I had worked like Mondrian as a student from still life and from nature, which was very exciting to me. Because to reduce everything you saw to one band and then to play with that moving it a fraction of an inch one way or another and getting the feel of a relationship and even getting perspective, you know. It seems incredible that one could get perspective out of that. But you can. I enjoyed doing that because that was a real experience of pure painting in space and measured distances and so on.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, Mondrian would sometimes speak of his colors as having certain qualities, a sort of physical presence. Red expands, you know, blue condenses, and—I don't know—a yellow diffuses perhaps. I'm not so sure I'm remembering him right. Did you think of your own colors you'd been using as having approximate qualities of the same kind? Would you say to yourself if you were using, you know, a large rectangular shape of red that it's expanding too far to the edge or something like that?

PERLE FINE: Oh, yes, I think so. I was aware of colors that make the eye dilate and of colors that contract. But I think that's always in relation to something else that it does that. Yes, doesn't it?

DOROTHY SECKLER: So that you could overcome it in any case? If you needed it for your mood you'd manage to use it in any case?

PERLE FINE: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Aside from its physical properties and so on?

PERLE FINE: Yes. There's a very important thing about color, too, that I learned only through reducing and making this problem for myself. And that is the importance of one color sublimating itself to another color in order to express something. And I don't mean making it darker or lighter, or smaller or larger. I mean selecting. And this takes a lot of putting on the canvas and looking at to see if it's really doing that. To give you an instance of what I mean, I did a number of them in a kind of, oh, such a beautiful blue, rather intense, and yet not so intense that it gave off light too much. And something had to be done to that blue to make it more beautiful. It was as beautiful as I could mix it. But then how could you make that more beautiful? You could with another color, the relationship of that to some other color. And that color will change the meaning of that blue and intensify it. And it's not necessarily a gray color either. It could be just a good green, let's say, would do something for that blue that nothing else in the world would do. And that was a very exciting thing to do too because—

DOROTHY SECKLER: By placing it next to it?

PERLE FINE: Yes, somewhere on it. Because I was able to reduce the problem in these, I was able to find an awful

lot of things to express what you couldn't be bothered with if you were doing a figure or something. A figure would take over and it wouldn't matter very much what color you used when you did it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But you hadn't in any case done the figure before that, had you?

PERLE FINE: Before I studied with Hofmann?

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, I mean before you got to this series.

PERLE FINE: No.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were doing abstractions but with more complex shapes.

PERLE FINE: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Just before you went into the "cool" series?

PERLE FINE: Yes. Quiet complex shapes. Not so much complex shapes as complexes of color and color relationships so that you'd be completely seduced by the variations in colors and textures and so on, and all of that would be going on to the point where you hardly were aware of the structure of the painting. You know, it would be rather beautiful in the sense that they expressed so much with a lot of what we call complexes, which are related colors and forms and things which ally themselves with one another for one reason or another. So that it made me feel that a thing can look pretty good and be pretty bad. And then on the other hand there are things that don't look so good that are pretty important and pretty good. That was a strange thing to discover.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How did you feel about the work that was being carried forward by your contemporaries in the same vein someone like, say, Clyfford Still, or Newman or Rothko or any of them, who were working also with very simple fields of color? Did they seem to have rather different objectives in some way?

PERLE FINE: I think so, yes, completely different objectives. I remember Rothko was at Betty Parsons when I was there. And he had his first show. And he was very nervous and excited about it. He saw me on the street and we went and had a drink together and he talked about his work. It was based on none of the things that we're talking about here. He was completely uninhibited by any of the moods, you might say, that I set for myself or anything like that. Which was a great help to him. And Newman, too, I think—I don't know Newman's early work—but I think both Rothko and Newman were somewhat Surrealist before they did this kind of thing.

DOROTHY SECKLER: They had this background of being interested in myth in terms of art and so on.

PERLE FINE: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But you apparently did not experience this?

PERLE FINE: No, I didn't have anything of that. I seemed always to be concerned with the thing itself, you know. The thing made the problem for me rather than any association with the Surrealists. And yet in quite a few of my paintings I realize that the paintings that had a sense of myth in them were the more successful ones. Which is another way of saying that the ones that depended more largely on the design, say, were less successful even though the problem set wasn't simply a matter of design. As I said earlier, the problem was one of turning an edge and getting a sense of distance through making one area larger than another and things moving in various ways, depth and so on. But for one reason or another sometimes just the way the paint was handled one would give you a kind of sense of mystery in what appears to be a perfectly flat design, and another wouldn't do it at all. It's very strange that it worked that way. Because some of them I tried to make very, very flat. And by trying very hard to make them very flat they came out not quite flat. And in doing that after it was done—the ones hanging on the wall in the studio in the country—you get that sense partly because it's not quite flat it takes on less distance, it has more perhaps a texture but very little, so little of it that you're hardly aware that that was the reason. But it has to do with everything that's there, and what isn't there as well. It's strange. And of course you know when it works and when it doesn't work that way and one is more important than the other when it has it than when it doesn't have it. I think I see some of that in the work, for instance, of Agnes Martin in which it seems to be absolutely flat, you know. And yet there's a mystery in there that I think is important. There's a quality about it that is more than just a flat design. And I think the flat design helps to maintain the something that makes it a picture. But other qualities—it's a very important thing that she gets in her work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: She's a very vital artist.

PERLE FINE: I've met her once or twice but I don't know her very well. She's very vital.

DOROTHY SECKLER: She was at Yaddo when I was there—by way of a digression—but I thought she would come out with something. But your point is very interesting that sometimes a thing can be almost black and yet it has

this mystery.

PERLE FINE: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It's interesting having arrived at this and it having had so much meaning for you, how you then departed from it. We haven't filled that in and I don't want to rush ahead too fast either—but what happened immediately after that?

PERLE FINE: From the Graham series to the collages. Well, it's again setting another problem for myself based on what I had just finished working on. Which was this: could I get as much satisfaction from paintings that had a more tactile surface, something in which the surface itself is more exciting: could I then get that same kind of sense of mystery; could I get something perhaps with a stronger motif and still have some of that mystery, something that was a little more brilliant, you know, something that has more brilliance and still have that mystery?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Brilliance in the sense of vibrancy?

PERLE FINE: Not so much in color but in surface quality, something that has a more tactile quality. Because I think it's possible to do that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You might of course at that point have gone in several directions.

PERLE FINE: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: One of them might have been to simply and completely deal with color. I'm interested in what would keep you from doing that?

PERLE FINE: Actually nothing. Because I did do just that. Which we haven't talked about at all.

DOROTHY SECKLER: No.

PERLE FINE: I did a series of about—I'm trying to think now, I probably have a record of it—maybe 12 or 14 or 15 four feet by four feet wood collages utilizing several of the forms that I've used in the wood collages that are current now. And in which I wanted one color to do all the work. And so I worked and worked to get that color. I simply couldn't get a color that would do it. And I found then that I had to get some dry color and mix it. There was a blue not like Klein's but one which has almost a feeling of an electric light behind it. And yet not one that hurts your eyes. But not one that is dull either. I did a series like that of about, as I say, about 15.

DOROTHY SECKLER: All blue?

PERLE FINE: Yes. They're all blue. But the only excitement is in the collage and the way the light hits as you see it—hits it on the side.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You mentioned wood. You mean this is wood on wood?

PERLE FINE: They're cutouts like what you've seen in the studio. But they're larger and they take on several forms. As a matter of fact, what I did was to make paintings of these before I did the wood collages. So that I knew that it would work, you know, function in that given area.

DOROTHY SECKLER: They were wooden forms on— ?

PERLE FINE: On masonite.

DOROTHY SECKLER: On masonite all painted blue?

PERLE FINE: Painted all blue.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So when you were painting them how did you indicate the divisions between what would be the raised part and what would be— ?

PERLE FINE: Well, that's the point. They were made all one color. There was not division of color.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But you said you made preliminary—

PERLE FINE: I made preliminary paintings which didn't satisfy me in color. And they also didn't satisfy me in that they didn't have that thickness. So that I was depending on the thickness and the line that I got from that thickness from the side to give the only interest there is outside of the single color. But, you know, your posing of the problem was interesting— that you hit exactly on the step I took before I did these.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you show those?

PERLE FINE: Well, I showed a few of them at the Graham but not as a complete one-man show. And I've shown them in the country. And Philip Johnson has invited me to donate one to an auction of paintings for Israel sometime this fall I believe.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You would not have tried the same experiment with, let's say, reds or yellows. Why do you think that the blue— ?

PERLE FINE: Well, as I said, I worked very hard to get this blue and I couldn't get it commercially anywhere. I had to get the powder color and mix the color that I wanted. Because it came forward and receded just enough for my purposes. Whether or not it would have worked with any other color I don't know. This is the color that I thought was right for that. It had a kind of shocking feel especially in the daytime when the light hit it on the side.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Of course blue for us has this association, whether we're conscious of it or not, of spatial, you know, infinite quality. I wonder if that's why— ?

PERLE FINE: Yes. It might have been the reason I did it because I'm attracted to—there are no colors I dislike. I like all colors. So I think it had to do with the fact that it emitted as much light as it absorbed, which was important. And exactly the same commercial wouldn't work at all. It just simply didn't do it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That brings up a kind of sense of color as the kind of property of color that one might even, say, investigate in a laboratory. And of course the person who's done that most of all is Albers.

PERLE FINE: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Have you strong feelings for what he was doing with color?

PERLE FINE: No, not really. I know Albers, too. He was a member of A.A.A. and a very sweet person. But I can't find very much interest in Albers. I find him too technical. Everything about it is technical. It's as if he mixed color and said, "Well isn't this interesting?"

[END OF INTERVIEW]