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Oral history interview with Richard A. Florsheim, 1968 Aug. 31

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Richard Florsheim on August 31, 1968. The interview was conducted by Dorothy Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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

Interview

RICHARD FLORSHEIM: [Inaudible] Certain combinations of forms, which I've always looked for. And I looked before, you know, 10 years ago, which you're probably not familiar with – was involved in very different subject matter. I was at one time a student of [Aaron] Bohrod and I was involved in, you know, people on the street and the kind of things that Bohrod used to do 30-35 years ago, these kind of American scene and so on, almost genre scenes.

And then I was involved for a long time in things which were antiwar. There were consistent figures and figures in armor and the scenery and spears and things clashing. And then when I lived in Mexico, you know, there was the Mexican scene and the light and the folk customs and so forth. And when I was out in the desert, the cactus, the rock, and this kind of thing.

And in recent years, Provincetown [MA] where I live in the summer, you know, with the trees and the sky and, as you said, the man-made forms next to the fluidity of nature and so on, and it's the same in the city. But there's a theme that runs all the way through this. And seriously enough it was pointed out to me that – I digress on that later.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Um-hm, um-hm.

MR. FLORSHEIM: Though I really realized that this was true. But always, it seems that in nature, because I believe in going back to nature, back to nature, back to nature to assess myself. I keep looking for it, for these combinations, which you were –

[OFF THE RECORD]

MR. FLORSHEIM: And also for a very spiky, sharp stake – the spear of the warrior becomes the spine on the cactus, becomes the mast of a ship in Provincetown, becomes an antenna on a building in the city, and so on. In other words, I have, evidently, something within me that is looking always for that scaffolding to attach the dream that I've always had, which is this combination of shapes and forms.

And just parenthetically, the way I became aware of it, and it's clear, you know, that [inaudible] I wasn't aware of it even for a long time – was, some years ago I gave some lectures for the Rockefeller Foundation in a program where, in the Chicago area, that allowed kids in the schools to select a painting from the Art Institute [of Chicago]. And then they would have it in their school for a month, and the artist who painted it would come and talk to the kids about his paintings.

And in a school whose name I've forgotten in the Chicago area, it was a primary school, I showed these good slides of different periods of my work. And one little boy about 11-12 years old said,

"You know, Mr. Florsheim, I see the same forms, you know, in the waves and in the boats and in the cities and in the deserts and in everything that you've done, and the Mexican things. You're always looking for these sharp [inaudible] form against something fluid or something retrolinear" – he didn't use the word "retrolinear," [inaudible] a kid, but whatever the word he used was.

And he pointed this out to me. All of a sudden, I saw it through this kid's eyes. And I was – kids are [inaudible] vision.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm.

MR. FLORSHEIM: But it is true that the same things, I suppose, will always be there as long as I live. I'm only one guy with a central focus and have a certain way of looking at things. So I looked around and I took out from the world around me the things that excite my imagination.

MS. SECKLER: Have you any idea when that began to be formulated for you, that early sense of looking for certain kinds of forms?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Well, this I always did and still do it instinctively. But the first time that I had a verbal realization, an intellectual realization was when this was pointed out to me 10 years ago. And I don't believe in – and I never do rationalize my own work very much. I've got to feel it right down in my stomach before I can do it. And I'm incapable of repeating myself in the sense of having gotten the formula. And I'm just, you know, going ahead and doing that [inaudible] to find a way of doing things that I haven't done before and a way of looking in new ways, that, I guess, any artist is.

So that I don't – I almost consciously shut off from myself a thinking about painting in rational terms: it is much more emotional, much more in a sensual language for me. And as a matter of fact, when I'm involved in something that I have to do which requires controlled intellectual activity, it kind of puts a damper on my painting. I've got to have sort of the all-free.

To this day I remember – I don't know who the guy was – but he was a Latin American painter who was evidently some kind of a character. And he said that he used to get up in the morning, and he would get dressed, and then he would tighten his belt. And he would very carefully feel the tightness of his belt because when he went into the studio, he would tighten the canvas down, which he was going to work to exactly that same tension. Otherwise, he couldn't work.

And while you know it's a funny sort of a centrist sort of behavior, still, it makes sense in that he would instinctively kind of be in tune with the thing he was doing – his physical nature in tune with the thing he was doing. And this was – I guess what I'm trying to say is that all these things which I can be aware of intellectually, when I'm in the studio and working, I don't want to be. I want to feel directly. I want the canvas to be great music the way you begin to move to music. Your body begins to move. I want to move to the canvas very responsively.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm. When did it begin for you?

MR. FLORSHEIM: [Inaudible] complicated. That's a direct question that I can only give a very involved answer to. [Laughter]

MS. SECKLER: [Laughter]

MR. FLORSHEIM: It begins in so many different ways. It begins with the day I was born on this planet. It begins with just a feeling that somehow red has to get into a canvas. Or it may begin with another canvas which was a failure and from which something is retrievable that you want to

try over again. Or it may begin as a specific conflict of form, of a combination of forms. Or it may begin with just a desire to – almost like a mud pie desire to use paint for the sensual gratification of the use of paint.

MS. SECKLER: You begin with the white canvas for it or do you use a drawing?

MR. FLORSHEIM: No. What I usually do – I like to work on panels, which is a big thing which becomes impractical. But I believe in the craft. I like to make things that I understand. I know how to grind color and make brushes. So I make my own panels, and I make them very carefully with sort of – on tempered Masonite, and I've been making my own [inaudible] and letting that set and then polishing it.

And then I do an undercoating, such as you see around – which is just a formality. Sometimes [inaudible] as a basis. I don't like to work on the white surface. That's kind of inhibiting. And sometimes, of course, just the action of spattered underpainting or a [inaudible] underpainting suggest certain unexpected combinations of formality and color. And it gives you a [inaudible], you know, a way of working in both directions, but lighter tones and darker tones. It gives you a middle tone.

And sometimes, you know, I work into the same formality as the underpainting, and sometimes I work against it, you know, the sort of optical effect. But that, again, is instinctive. I like to say that I have [inaudible] variety of underpaintings sitting around. And someday something will begin to occur to me. I look to see if there's an underpainting that sort of lends itself. Sometimes the underpainting itself suggests the painting.

MS. SECKLER: Yeah. Are these definitely underpaintings, these blue paintings?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Yes, um-hm.

MS. SECKLER: They're so beautiful. It's almost a shame. [Laughter]

MR. FLORSHEIM: [Laughter] Give me a chance, and I'll louse it up into a painting. [Laughter] But I believe that, you know, very strongly what I said about before – an attempt at craft. I think one of the quarrels that I have with some of my colleagues is the disregard for what you might call the natural law of materials. You know, they can't access some truth in this respect. A canvas will destroy itself if you don't – you know, physically destroy itself if you don't treat the materials you are using with a certain respect and savvy.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm. Well, what's – when you said "craft," what do you specially have in mind? The pattern of the material or a pattern of space or time?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Well, at this point, I would have had reference to the physical nature of the materials which you're using. I remember reading an article in Latin America some years back by the [inaudible] about a painting by one of my colleagues in the show, [inaudible], where they had a hopeless restoration problem with a painting in the Brooklyn Museum because he had used glue over all. Well, this is what I mean by disrespect. And a drastic lack of knowledge of the nature of materials – I think that others should be able to make a craft object of some merit and substance, and of course, that's not enough. But it's a start.

And artists shouldn't be allowed to [inaudible] complain because an automobile won't run on maple syrup. But there are a lot of artists who put maple syrup in their gas tanks and then wonder why the engine doesn't run. And I think that this – you know, an engine runs on gas and an artist runs

on – I think a sense of his materials because it's innate, I think, in any art form, whatever it is.

In the dance, you have to move the way a human body can move. You can't expect people to dance on one finger, standing on their head. But there has been a great deal of sort of aggressive hostility almost toward material and the craft.

MS. SECKLER: You see so many artists now, the younger ones, and they often have, I think, [inaudible] led by a factor of [inaudible] – sort of never [inaudible] any materials at all.

MR. FLORSHEIM: Well, about that I have no comment because of something that a friend of mine said last year, I believe very strongly. I think a lot of what they call art today is really, for me, show business. And about show biz, I have no comment. I don't know. I'm not in show biz. I'm in the craft of painting. And there is much going on around me for which I have no interest.

MS. SECKLER: Well, how did you learn this craft? What – did you have some formal schooling?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Well --

MS. SECKLER: What were some of – when you were younger?

MR. FLORSHEIM: I guess I'm a fairly plagiaristic product of my time, being, you know, a Depression baby. An awful lot of my contemporaries had no formal art training at all, or much of any other kind. We learned from each other, you know?

MS. SECKLER: Were you on the project?

MR. FLORSHEIM: No, I was a little too young. Almost everybody I knew was on the project. But I was just emerging from high school when the project was organized fresh from the war. And I was in the navy. But I was very involved with the people who were on the project. And we learned – you know, Max Gurner's book came out. And we all studied that assiduously. And we talked shop. But I was self-taught. I had no formal art education at all, except for a few Saturday classes with Aaron Bohrod when I was in high school.

And the rest of it, I learned from my – not so much my contemporaries, but the group of artists eight or ten years older than myself and who were very --

MS. SECKLER: It sounds like it could have been Chicago.

MR. FLORSHEIM: Yeah. Many of them, you know, left Chicago, people you [inaudible] before, Julio de Diego and Eddie Norman, Mitch Siporin, Bohrod, Fletcher Martin. You had Eisen Barn [phonetic]. There were just hundreds of them. But it was a good time. Maybe it's because we were all young. And young people today have the same feeling.

But the fact that there were no galleries. There was no hoopla about art. There was no machinery of art. There was really nothing to do except paint. And the only reason for painting was because you loved it. And you tried desperately to stay alive so that you could go on painting. There was no fame, fortune, or anything else to be expected. So we were all very intimate with each other and very close and very helpful and cooperative. And it was a very good period to grow up in that regard.

[OFF THE RECORD]

MS. SECKLER: That sounds very interesting. How did you happen to, coming out of high school, meet this group of artists who were eight or ten years older?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Well, you know, it's one of those axioms of life, though, see. I have a feeling that there are two kinds of people in the world. There are lots of kinds, but for this purpose, you can divide people into sort of two categories. The kid who listens and the kid who has to talk, in a sense, the guy who – you might call it a receptor and the guy who's a communicator.

And the little kid who graduates and says, "Look here," you know, and wants to do something about something and say something. And I guess I was that kind of a kid. And as a youngster, in my early years I wanted to be a writer because I wrote a lot as a kid and I wrote very seriously.

But in high school, in my senior year in high school, I met a teacher who was my history teacher. And there were four kids in the class, only. And none of the four of us needed the class for college entrance. And he was interested in painting. So he said, "How would you guys like to study art history?" he says, "as history?" And we all thought that would be great. So we studied art history.

And we very shortly realized that if you were going to study art history, you had to know something about painting firsthand; you had to do some painting, right?

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm.

MR. FLORSHEIM: So he arranged the Saturday morning class around that. I was 16, I guess. And I just took to painting immediately. It was what I had been looking for, and I didn't know it was there. And that was it. And through Aaron Bohrod and through this history teacher, very quickly I met this whole generation of artists who were then in their 20s and all just starting out. And they were wonderfully warm, friendly, supportive, interested, helpful – got me all involved in what they were doing.

MS. SECKLER: Were they on the project themselves mostly?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Sure. Most of them were on the project. And memory fails me now, I guess, about a lot of them. But there were literally hundreds that I got to know. And I became very much a part of that group. And as an adolescent here, you know, the group of older men and women who seemed to like me and accept me – and any insecurities of that period of one's life, I found, you know, a place for myself.

And I also found that painting was the most exciting and gratifying and challenging thing I'd ever gotten involved in in my life. And I just painted night and day with the energy of a youngster. And it's a habit that hasn't left me in 30-some years.

MS. SECKLER: Aaron Bohrod – I know his work somewhat I -- when he was at that time, I can sort of imagine an American theme painter, kind of.

MR. FLORSHEIM: Well, at that time he was completely unknown, of course.

MS. SECKLER: Was he?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Sure. As a matter of fact, I remember when he won his first prize. I got word of it on the – I don't know how. I knew somebody around there had got – the word leaked out of the jury that he had won the first prize at the Art Institute. And this must have been 1933 or 4 or somewhere around in there.

And I came marching over to his house. And his wife was pregnant with their first child who is now – I don't know, 35 years old, I guess, 34 years old. And he didn't believe me. He thought I was just a crazy kid that had picked it up. And this was the first real recognition he had.

But Bohrod was then painting a very different kind of a picture from what he's known for today. They were rather folkish, expressionistic, humorously and imaginatively distorted street scenes and peddlers with carts. They were [inaudible] even a little Chagall-like, although not like – you know, they didn't have the same sort of Jewish peasant quality. But it was a very personal expression, unlike the kind of formalized type of still life that he's done for, you know, years now, trompe l'oeil kind of thing.

And he was very good because he just let us paint. He'd give us a little help. We'd get stuck because we didn't know what the hell we were doing. And you know, he'd make a dab at the painting and suggest a new [inaudible] approach. He'd say, "Why don't you try this medium?" and so forth. And he really just gave us a chance to do what we wanted to do.

MS. SECKLER: Were you looking at the work of any European artists at that time?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Oh, of course, then I became – I haunted the galleries in the museum. And there were certain people who, right off the bat, attracted me. Well, before that I had had an experience which I was just reminded of this summer. I hadn't thought about it in a long time. It happened really before then. I guess it was almost the first artist experience I ever had.

I went to the Art Institute one day. And I wasn't particularly interested in painting. I guess I was about 15 years old. And they had an exhibition, an international print show that they used to have, semi-annually. And I was looking around. And there was a print that I was really drawn to. And it was by somebody by the name of Käthe Kollwitz. I didn't know – never heard of Käthe Kol;witz – anybody else. I'd heard of Rembrandt, and, you know, a few people like that that any kid would know.

And there was a young curator there who saw my [inaudible], and he came over and he said, "Do you like that?" And I said, "I think it's marvelous." I said, "Who is it?" And he told me who Käthe Kollwitz was and so forth. And then he said to me, "Why don't you buy it?" And I said, "You've got to be kidding. Museums don't sell the pictures."

He said, "No, this is a contemporary exhibition. And the things are for sale." And I said to him, "How much is it?" And he said, "It's 15 dollars." I said, "My lord, I haven't got 15 dollars. Where would I ever get 15 dollars." He said, "Well, do you get an allowance?" I said, "Sure." And he said, "Well, you could pay for it on time. You could pay for it for five dollars a month."

So I bought this Käthe Kollwitz at that time for five dollars a month. And I still have it, as a matter of fact. It's a beautiful print. And this was my first, you know, little bit of awareness. You know, I'd forgot about it until [inaudible] in school. But Kollwitz was an influence. And I was drawn very much to Orozco tremendously, Daumier, El Greco. And of course, all these people were well represented in the Institute. There's a magnificent Orozco. I think it's called [inaudible]. It was a popular, if I'm not mistaken, [inaudible] figures in a doorway.

And then the great El Greco *Dormition of the Virgin* and a lot of marvelous Graves and Daumiers. And then Renault because the Institute had run the complete graphic work [inaudible] they bought from his widow. And I remember we went through those boxes with tremendous excitement. And, oh, there were a lot of people that – mostly in this area, though, impressionists and rather sad.

Adolescents are inclined to be rather sad. I've gotten more cheerful as I've gotten older. [Laughter]

MS. SECKLER: [Laughter] Are you an only child or were you a loner for any reason?

MR. FLORSHEIM: I was a loner. I still am, I guess. I have one brother, one older brother – had one older brother, whose niece you met today, as a matter of fact.

MS. SECKLER: Oh yeah.

MR. FLORSHEIM: That was his daughter you met today, his oldest child. But, you know, I've been a loner. I still am a loner. I've never really fitted any particular category, I guess. At times it's made me very unhappy that, you know, I couldn't really identify with an aesthetic, a group of artists who represent an aesthetic. When the abstract expressionists were all, you know, around, I couldn't identify with them, although I liked some of their work. When – today with Pop and Op and so forth, I had no feeling for that, especially – although some of those people's things I like.

But I've never been able to go along with a group of guys doing the same thing at the same time. I always had to do my thing my own way, however it turned out. And it's made me very unhappy and very lonely at times.

MS. SECKLER: Well, of course, you did have this [inaudible] early in the '30s.

MR. FLORSHEIM: Tremendous.

MS. SECKLER: And those were really at one spirit with you then.

MR. FLORSHEIM: Tremendously. We used to show each other our work, you know, as young artists will. And we'd criticize and discuss each other's work and talk about methods and techniques and how to size a canvas and which colors – we'd get all excited about new media and try them out. When [Jacques] Maroger came along with his black varnishes, and anything that came along, we'd try. We tried everything.

A lot of them were doing fresco and experimenting with tempera. I did a whole big series of egg temperas with, you know, homemade panels with homemade media and so forth. And we would even try – not very successfully, I must admit – trying different kinds of earth and washing them and grinding them to see if we could get interesting pigments and so on.

So there was this sharing of – but as I said, there was no – there was no competitiveness in those days, the way you feel the competition today in the art world, because there was nothing to compete about except for the quality of your own work.

MS. SECKLER: Were they held together by a kind of social attitude as well?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Sure. Oh, yeah. We were all wild-eyed radicals, I guess, in those days. And --

MS. SECKLER: [Laughter] [Inaudible]

MR. FLORSHEIM: Sure. And anybody that wasn't, you know, was sort of a dead-head if he was a youngster. I guess today it's probably similar among young people.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm. [Inaudible]

MR. FLORSHEIM: A sense of, you know, you can't just accept things as they are. And you have to

get involved or you're not alive.

MS. SECKLER: How did that work in Chicago? I remember, of course, in New York there was the Artists Congress and Artists Union and so on. But I don't know much about Chicago.

MR. FLORSHEIM: It was exactly the same. And there was an enormous group of artists. I remember just before the war started, there was a thing called National Art Week, which I guess still exists. But in those days, the Federal Art Project was involved in it. And it was during – it was in the Roosevelt era. And we put on an exhibition in Chicago of – I think we had 50-some different empty stores and so forth where we showed work for a week. And at that time, we had over 5000 artists involved. It was a big art community, the same pattern with the union. The Artists Union was there, and very active.

As a matter of fact, as you know, Artists Equity, with which I have always been involved – it began in '37, and at one time was president of – was really an outgrowth of those of us who were active in project and union days. And it had this sense of wanting to do something about the – especially the economic condition of the artist, but also a social awareness of wanting to do something, you know, generally, in the bigger picture.

MS. SECKLER: You apparently were not as much beset by factionalism in Chicago as the New York group was.

MR. FLORSHEIM: We had exactly the same pattern. You know, I think – you know, in those days regionalism was, you know, very much discussed.

MS. SECKLER: Yeah.

MR. FLORSHEIM: And I find today, you know, making my home for about five months of the year in Chicago, that New Yorkers ask this question of me. And my answer is always the same, that it's the same country, that Chicago and New York are not separate countries in the art world or in any other respect. It's the same problems. [Inaudible] and more out of New York. But the same problems, the same divisions, the same agreements, the same subjects, the same conflicts come up, and I'm sure in Los Angeles and anywhere else that artists tend to congregate.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm.

MR. FLORSHEIM: There was a lot of factionalism. There were a lot of arguments. And there still is.

MS. SECKLER: What kinds of things were you – as president in those days, I suppose you were trying a great variety of things. But what did they encompass?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Oh, golly, I was all over the map. I tried – you know, every medium I heard about, I tried. I mean, I didn't – I made lithographs, and I made block prints and wood cuts and engravings. And I would experiment with gesso and tempura and oil and watercolor and all kinds of drawing materials. I worked with things suggested by my early experience with Bohrod, with things that had to do with almost a kind of genre thing.

I even tried doing cubist paintings instead of – well, as I look back on them now, extraordinarily [inaudible]. I see those pictures in my mind's eye as I think about it, things which were really abstract impressionist. You know, there wasn't, at least to my knowledge, any abstract expressionism around, but just trying to paint for its own sake.

If you do something which they call pallet painting. And I would take the leftover paint on my pallet and then put it on a board or a piece of paper, just any old which-way to see what happens and what the [inaudible] suggest and how they would move and how colors would combine by accident, which was really an attempt to kind of [inaudible] this painting without knowing what it was, but just out of a sense of experiment.

MS. SECKLER: Did that then seep into your work in some way? Or was that quite a separate activity?

MR. FLORSHEIM: No, it all – you know, all of the formative years, you know, you come into focus out of a whole lot of different things.

MS. SECKLER: Yeah.

MR. FLORSHEIM: I think the most natural thing in the world to try, you know, everything. Your instinct – you get all excited about it. Some of it tells you about – well, I remember a thing called patroli [phonetic] red, which was a pigment that was used a lot in Italian fresco painting. I remember being tremendously excited about doing underpaintings in that. I used to grind the color, the patroli red, and just make a kind of monotone underpainting, which would glaze later. And oh, what an excitement, you know, the first time I tried that.

Anything that came along – and then gradually, you'd pick and choose and select and leave out, as you – you know, the whole thing for me is a question of simplifying and leaving out. As I get older, I think, what's important now is not what I include, but what I exclude from a painting and from a concept. But those early years, there were a lot of things tried so that you have something to leave out. If you don't try it, you have nothing to leave out. [Laughter]

MS. SECKLER: Yeah. So that you would have been – you weren't then doing a lot of still life and some cityscapes then?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Yeah. I was always interested in the cities because, quite naturally, I'm interested in where I live, you know. And the city is all around me and the smoke and the people and --

MS. SECKLER: What part of Chicago were you working in?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Well, I had various studios. I had one on North Avenue, which was – as a matter of fact, I think it's still there, that studio building where – I had a great big, a great barn of a place with a big window and a balcony and [inaudible], no bath. The bath was down the hall. And it was 30 dollars a month, I remember it was. It was a great place, and around the near north side of Chicago [inaudible], where most of the artists, you know, hung around.

And then there were a lot of old coach houses, which have since been torn down [inaudible].

MS. SECKLER: [Inaudible]

MR. FLORSHEIM: Where Eddie Moman used to live and Rudolph Ryden is one who lived unknown, I think, outside of Chicago, not even as well-known in Chicago as he was known as [inaudible] was one of the very first American cubist painters.

[OFF THE RECORD]

MS. SECKLER: You mentioned something about going to Mexico. Was that done -- early today?

MR. FLORSHEIM: No. You know, thinking this through, so many things come to mind. But I got out of the navy in '46. And I didn't know what the heck to do with myself. I had no teaching job, no gallery, no nothing, no reputation, no anything. And in '48, we got married. And we moved into the studio which we still occupy in Chicago.

And it was rough going, you know, economically, to put it mildly. And I taught for a year at the Layton School of Art in Milwaukee. I would commute up there two days a week. So I took over [inaudible] Windoski's classes when he went to Tallahassee. And then I didn't want to go on teaching in that kind of a setup. And it was the days of the G.I. Bill.

And so by great good fortune, a friend of ours had a house in Mexico. And he offered us the use of his house if we would feed the servants, which he would pay, because he wasn't going to live in it. So we rented our place in Chicago at a profit of 70 dollars a month, and we went to Mexico. We were over there, I guess, for six or eight months.

And we lived and fed these people, and ourselves, on the difference in the two rentals. And it was really just a way of getting a stretch a work without, you know, being harassed or having to teach or do anything, just settle down. And I did a great deal of painting and did the first portfolio of prints that I put out, which was called *Each Man in His Time*, series of 12 prints, which I did in Mexico and, you know, published in Mexico.

MS. SECKLER: Did Mexico affect your work in any way, either because of the art or the country?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Oh, both, but mostly the light. I'd never lived in that bright light before. And as I look back now, I realize that my color changed radically during that time. It became much lighter and much more intense. I'd painted rather darkly and rather, you know, sort of Munich brown soup, you know, sort of subdued and [inaudible] and dark. I used to use pounds of umber and black in my paintings.

And in Mexico, that wonderful clear light and sunshine and bright colors and the visual quality of Mexico, just fascinating – you know, the people expressing themselves more with action and movement and color than with words, as we do in this country.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm.

MR. FLORSHEIM: So it had a tremendous effect. And then I had another experience, though, which was marvelous. Fernando Gamboa, who is in the – I don't know what his job is called, curator of fine arts in Begas Artis [phonetic], you know. Being a government agency, it's divided into music and dance and painting and so on – offered me a show of my prints.

So the following year – I think it was in '51, if I'm not mistaken, maybe '52 – I had a big print show. And the response of people that I'd show is one of the great thrills of my life. Not a single print was sold to anybody. Nothing was even mentioned about sales. But my great experience was standing in the gallery and watching simple people look at my work and really respond to it. Unable to read the labels, they didn't know who the heck I was or couldn't care less, you know, whether I was young or old or Mexican or American.

I mean, but coming and spending an hour or two hours, really looking at my prints was an eye-opener to me and gave me a sense of confidence in my own dreams, earlier dreams, as an artist that you really could reach people through your work, that it wasn't as much of a blank wall of noncommunication as an artist in our society sometimes feels he's faced with.

But above all, it was a marvelous life. I think my color has never been the same since. I've seldom gone back to the dark coloration of earlier, before.

MS. SECKLER: I'm afraid I've rushed through inadvertently and kind of sped ahead there by asking about Mexico.

MR. FLORSHEIM: Oh, that's okay.

MS. SECKLER: And why I assumed it had come around during the Chicago years. But to go back a little bit to Chicago there, I guess the next question is, what happened to [inaudible]? Was the war the next thing that came along to take you out of that circle that was congealed? Was that --

MR. FLORSHEIM: Yeah. Well, then, of course, we all got broken up by the war. You know, I remember so well 1939, you know, with the beginnings of the war. And I remember particularly – you know how little episodes in your life stand out? – being in my studio. And Norman McLeash was a painter and the younger brother of Archibald McLeash, who was a very close friend of mine – was in my studio when – and we were listening to the radio, I think, to a concert.

And the news broke in as the – that the Germans had invaded Russia. And what was it? June or July of '41 – and I realized that that was it, and we were, you know – this was really Armageddon, and we were going to get involved. And I realized that it was just a question of time before I got, you know, I would be taken.

So I spent my time – at that time, I was living with my father and stepmother. And I was just painting desperately. '41 was the most productive year I ever had in my life because I felt almost as though I had to say everything I was ever going to say in painting that one year because I knew that – I didn't know if I was ever going to be able to paint again. I was obviously going to have to go into the service. I was in my 20s and reasonably healthy and was bound to be taken.

And I felt that I wouldn't survive it. I had a very fatalistic feeling about it. As a matter of fact, when I went into the service, I had a small collection of prints, about 30 or 35 things that I loved, including the Käthe Kollwitz that I told you about, and other things that I'd acquired when I lived in Europe in the '30s.

And I gave them to Kosh Neland [phonetic], who was the curator of prints at the Institute [Art Institute of Chicago] at the time, with the request that he keep them for me if I came back. If I didn't come back, then he should keep them for the Institute. And so, you know, I didn't know what was going to happen. So I spent the year of '41 until Pearl Harbor just working. I did hundreds of paintings that year, just hundreds. I worked every minute.

MS. SECKLER: What kind of things? Could you describe any of those?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Well, I had an exhibition at the New School. The first exhibition I had in New York was in '44 during the war, at the New School. And it had many of those paintings in it. But they were – oh, I remember – I wish I had a catalog of it here. There was a painting reproduced on the cover, which was of two sort of wildly struggling figures against a torn, stormy, dramatic, almost melodramatic sky. There were – and I look back and I wonder where in the hell I ever got the idea?

I remember a painting of a man, a nude man, absolutely focal, like the things we saw, you know, from the concentration camps after that. I don't know where I got the idea. Figures on steps with blood all over the place. People beating each other over the head with sticks with spikes in them, things of this kind. I guess they were all – I was obsessed with the war for a long time, and a long time

after the war.

I had an exhibition in '46 when I got out of the service, at the Art Institute of things that I had done while I was in service, because whenever I got a chance, I would – but it was always about war, about struggle, about blood, about – so there were skulls and bodies and – the first painting I ever showed at the Whitney was a sort of barbed-wire entanglement with shreds of what could be flesh or torn rags and so forth scattered all around, very tumultuous, stormy kind of a painting.

MS. SECKLER: Well, this is a very different kind of character from the early works before the war?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Yeah, um-hm. Well, before the war I probably really was just finding my way around.

MS. SECKLER: But you didn't have this pain, painful [inaudible] subject matter at that time?

MR. FLORSHEIM: No, no.

MS. SECKLER: So it was a direct reaction to what was going on in the world?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Yeah. Although in a sense, I wasn't thinking this. You know, as I look back, I was sensing it. I was – you know, I feel self-conscious now, you know, talking about it, in a sense, because I don't know how to say what, you know, I can feel still, you know, what I felt at the time. But a sense of desperateness, I guess, some of it personal, you know. It had to do with – you know, I didn't know how the hell to make a life for myself as an artist. There was no way, as there is today, to make a life, unless you did commercial work or something of this kind.

So part of it was a personal desperation. Part of it was a sense, I guess, of what was happening. But I didn't rationalize it. I got it out of my system every day in the studio. And then I tried to forget it.

MS. SECKLER: I suppose that it was some form of art therapy for a social weapon and to that extent you could communicate.

MR. FLORSHEIM: Sure, except that I really didn't – although I had dreams of grandeur, you know, and of being known and of all the things that a young artist can dream about, I still – I don't think I really believed it, you know? I kind of had a fantasy of myself as just sort of a voice in the wilderness that nobody was ever going to listen to.

And part of this desperation was in the paintings, and part of it was the world around me that made you feel desperate. It was all mixed in together. But they were paintings which, you know, had no – really no audience, no market. Nobody really seemed – except for a handful of people who had – were interested, nobody cared much about them or paid much attention to them.

I had one very close friend at the time who gave me a great deal of help and encouragement, and that was Dan Rich, who is now the director of the Worcester Museum, and as a matter of fact, who wrote the introduction to the catalog of that first show in New York in '44. But he used to come to my studio as a friend and look at my work. [Jose] Pijoán, the man that I mentioned from the University of Chicago; Peter Pollack, whom I'm sure you know, who has been working for the Federal Art Club they founded – Art Center.

And I think these three guys were my audience. Nobody else was faintly interested in what I was doing. But somehow, in a funny sense, it was enough. I was happy to have anybody that wanted

to look at them. I never even bothered to put a frame on them. They'd go from my easel into the attic or the basement or closet or a box or someplace. There was no place to show them, nothing to do with them except do them. And that was it.

MS. SECKLER: Were you doing prints at this time, too?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Yeah. I started making prints the very first things I made, I think, almost. Because I had that retrospective, what, a couple of years ago at the gallery in New York, 30 years. And the first prints we found were 1935, little etchings that I did then. But I wouldn't – again, I was in it to make an etching. I'd make two prints, you know, pull two proofs. And I used to give the flights away to friends, you know, who were a silversmith to use for the jewelry or something. I didn't know what to do with them. I never dreamed of keeping them. I wish to heck I had some of them now, you know, that I could pull more proofs from.

But it was done always and only for its own sake. There was no other reason to do it.

MS. SECKLER: There was a period of a great deal of richness in many ways. And a kind of comic-strip among artists that never seemed to quite dissipate. Is there anything that you recall about the community of Chicago itself that was particularly important or influential in the way you – I mean, aside from the artists in your immediate group?

MR. FLORSHEIM: In what sense?

MS. SECKLER: Well, I don't know Chicago well enough to grasp what it, you know – what the city might have meant to you. But you were living in a part of it, I gather, that was where the artists were living.

MR. FLORSHEIM: Yeah.

MS. SECKLER: And was there much sense of – since these were the Depression years, and I suppose you had, you know, were there [inaudible]?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Oh, sure, of course. There was [inaudible] everywhere. My mother died, and I was living with my father in a hotel.

MS. SECKLER: When did your mother die?

MR. FLORSHEIM: She died in '33 or '34.

MS. SECKLER: Was that a very traumatic thing for you?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Yeah. Oh, tremendously, of course. And we were very close, and it was a, you know, devastating experience. She died of cancer, and then, you know, it was a long, drawn-out thing over a period of over a year.

MS. SECKLER: Did that have – no, I suppose – I wondered if that could have in any way affected the more macabre subject matter?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Sure, of course. That's why I say it was things in my personal life as well as the things around me.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm.

MR. FLORSHEIM: But the curious part was, my father, although he, like everybody else, lost his shirt in the Depression, was, you know, not out in the street. He wasn't destitute, by a long shot. And yet I preferred – and he never – he found it difficult to understand that I didn't want to stay at the hotel and eat hotel food with him, which was perfectly good food; that I preferred to go, say, to the Millmans', who lived in a converted coach house. And there was a whole group of people at that time, John Fabian, a sculptor; Eddie Noman, Julio de Diego was a part of that group, and so on in that building, where everybody chipped in 15 cents a day and we'd buy, you know, greens and maybe a bone or something and make a stew.

MS. SECKLER: [Laughter] Exactly what we were doing in Brooklyn Heights the same years.

MR. FLORSHEIM: And that I preferred to chip in my 15 cents and eat with them rather than to go home and eat hamburger or chicken with my family who could afford it, because I found with them the companionship and community that I couldn't find in my own environment. Very young, rebelled against that environment and left it, and very little use for it.

MS. SECKLER: Then, of course, after that you went and lived – that was, when, in '33. And then there were the later '30s. Did anything change before this thing of going into the army?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Sure. Well, of course, the big crisis came in my life when I graduated from high school just shortly after my mother died. And I didn't want to go to university. I just wanted to go and paint. My father wouldn't let me. He insisted that I go to the university, some university. And I had been a very bright high school student. I had excellent marks. I was top or second in my class all the way through school. So I had my ticket to any university that I wanted to go to. I was a junior selection, you know, for Dartmouth, et cetera. I didn't want to go to any of these places; I just wanted to paint.

And my father found this hard to understand, for reasons which I can well appreciate today, but couldn't then. And so we compromised by my going to the University of Chicago as a student at large, not seeking a degree, but just to be there. I was bright enough that I was accepted on this basis.

And I rebelled against it. I didn't want to do it. And I would paint at home. You know, I'd play hooky from the university and paint in the hotel. And my father was suspicious of me and he would call up, you know, during the day to see if I was home or not. And I wouldn't answer the phone. And then I'd have to air out the room so it wouldn't smell of paint and hide the paintings so he wouldn't know what I'd be doing.

And this went on for a while until I met this man Pijoán, who was – do you know him, by any chance?

MS. SECKLER: No.

MR. FLORSHEIM: He is, in Spanish-speaking circles, probably the most significant art historian that ever came down the pike, wrote a 20-volume history of the world art, called *Summa Artis*. Of course, this is all in Spanish.

MS. SECKLER: How do you spell his name?

MR. FLORSHEIM: P-i-j-o-a-n, Joseph Pijoán.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm.

MR. FLORSHEIM: And Pijoán, who was a teacher of mine, became my especial friend. And he understand this – you know, what made me tick. And he was a really Renaissance type of guy who – he was a close friend of Orozco's, and he was responsible, as a matter of fact, for the Pomona frescoes, you know, the *Prometheus* frescoes. He was – he commissioned that when he was teaching at Pomona.

Well, unbeknownst to me – I wanted to quit the university; I wanted to go to Europe. And I wanted to work and I wanted to look and I wanted to learn. And my father just would have no part of it. So Pijoán went to him one day, without telling me. And Pijoán was then making probably 7500 dollars a year as a professor, which in those days was a pretty substantial salary. And he said to my father, "I understand you won't let Dick go to Europe." He said, "He's got to go," and he said, "I'm going to give him 100 dollars a month out of my pay so that he can go. I'm going to give him an allowance of 100 dollars a month to spend."

And my father was furious, as I can well appreciate he would have been. And I came home, and of course, he chewed me out thoroughly and was very angry with me. And I was very upset about the whole thing.

But it resulted in my father saying, "Well, okay. If you're really – if this is what you really want to do, do it. But," he said, "if you're going to be a painter, you're going to do it on your own. I'm not going to give you any financial help whatsoever. I'll give you a couple of years in Europe and give you an allowance so that you can live there and work there and learn. But when you come back, you're on your own. You'll have to go it on your own. If you've got the stuff to be a painter, you're going to have to do it. If you don't, that's your problem. But I'm not going to pave the way for you."

So I went. And I lived in Europe from '36 until, oh, it was pretty close to the Sudeten crisis in '38, when things looked like war would break out, and I came home.

MS. SECKLER: What part of Europe were you in?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Well, I lived most of the time in Paris and worked there and got to know people and learned the language thoroughly. I still speak it fluently. And I traveled around, to a certain extent. I spent some time in Italy. And I was in Holland and Belgium and Czechoslovakia and Germany, Greece, Egypt.

And the whole time, looking and working, painting, drawing, copying things, haunting museums. And I was desperately serious. Galio – if I could only go back now with the energy that I had then and the difference in point of view that I have now --

MS. SECKLER: What would you do different now?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Well, it would be much easier. I would know, of course, where to look. I wouldn't have spent so many really kind of desperate hours that I spent then sitting in a room alone and wondering what the hell life was all about. But I guess that's part of being that age, in any way. You know, you're a sensitive guy and you're trying to find yourself and where you're going.

I don't know. I guess I wouldn't do it all that differently. I'd be easier with people. It was very hard for me to relate to people. The artists that I met, I got along with fine. And as a matter of fact, there's a little anecdote. I don't know if you want – are you interested in this kind of thing?

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm.

MR. FLORSHEIM: I have a lifelong friend that I met in those days, Rose Vellum, who is now a woman in her early 60s. And she's a curator, a senior curator at the Louvre. But at the time I first knew her, she was just a young graduate student and trying to get a job in the museum system.

And one Christmas eve, '37 or '38, she had a party at her little apartment. And there were a bunch of us there. And we had a lovely time. We ate a lot and drank a lot, and we finally wound up dancing in the streets about two or three o'clock in the morning, you know, having just a ball. And there was a gal there that I enjoyed and that I danced with, and so on. And then I have to skip through. I should have said that later.

But through the years, I admired the work of Germaine Rechier, the sculptor. And everywhere I saw it, I was drawn to it. I thought, "Gee, this woman really had something." And then she died, you know, rather young, of cancer. And a few years ago when I was in Paris, I said to Rose Vellum, "Gee, you know, I wish I'd met Germaine Rechier. You know, I had such a feeling for her work."

And she looked at me in astonishment. And she said, "What do you mean, Germaine Rechier?" I said, "I never met her in my life." She said, "Who do you think you were dancing with that night? That was Germaine Rechier."

MS. SECKLER: Ooh.

MR. FLORSHEIM: My usual inability to get people's names on the first meeting, I never registered as to who it was. And I had this – it's curious – this feeling of empathy with her, you know, that one evening that we spent together. We enjoyed each other enormously. And I never saw her again. And then all through these years, followed her work. [Laughter]

MS. SECKLER: [Inaudible] museums weren't quite what you saw around you everywhere. Were you working while you were thinking about art at all?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Oh, sure, deep in this, you know, particularly drawings and things and copying things and trying to get insight into how people worked. And, oh, you know, really going to the source of painting. I remember the tremendous excitement of seeing the Reubens, you know, in Antwerp, or the Flemish paintings in Bruges. And I spent weeks of my life in the Louvre, you know, really with my nose in the paintings.

And I went everywhere and looked at everything and thought about it and, you know, regurgitated it. And it came up in my painting and so on. And I would try to work things out in my own painting that I had seen, use them in different approaches and different concepts of form and handling color and so on.

It was really – Europe of those – whatever it was, two-and-a-half or three years, was really my university. And, you know, I came back with a pretty fair knowledge of who I was and where I wanted to go, and never regretted being a dropout at all.

MS. SECKLER: You got involved with the – you know, you'd been working with artists, working in a more traditional way in this country. And when you were abroad, did you get caught up in fauvism, cubism? I know you've had a taste of that, in any case. Or were you more – you know, in the Louvre, were you paying more attention to [inaudible]?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Yeah. Although I knew the work that – you know, I met Picasso, because he was a friend of Pijoán's. Again, they were contemporaries and lifelong friends. So – but my one meeting with Picasso at that time – while I got to know him later after the war – was a funny, funny episode.

And I got to know Dali a little bit. I met Brava. I never got to know him.

You know, I was aware of what was going on. And I met a lot of the younger artists who were, you know – had established reputations today, would have been just starting out. And – but mostly, the museums were my school at that time. I had had, you know, this intense involvement with my own contemporaries here. But I wanted to find out, you know, where it all came from.

And I've always – still have – this feeling that I belong to a continuity, that although I hope and feel, you know, that I'm a person of my own time, but that I belong to the whole continuity of human consciousness. I don't feel that art just happened, you know, with cubism or abstract expressionism. It goes all the way back in a flow.

And as a matter of fact, I'll show you sometime. I don't know if I have it here. But Rosella, that I mentioned, wrote the introduction to the catalog of my retrospective show a couple of years ago. And she mentions this, you know, how I used to haunt the museum, where she was then an attaché, you know, day after day and trying to figure out how things were done.

As a matter of fact, it's a funny story. At the Institute in Chicago when I was a youngster, I used to get in trouble with the guards because I'm near-sighted. And to see how something is done, I had to peer at it – I had to get right up next to it. And the guards used to, you know, give me a hard time that I was getting that close to the paintings. I was breathing on them, I guess.

MS. SECKLER: [Laughter]

MR. FLORSHEIM: So when I got to know Dan Rich, he gave me a special little pass, which I used to carry in my pocket, saying that Mr. Florsheim is a professional painter and has my permission to get as close to the paintings as he wants. [Laughter]

MS. SECKLER: [Laughter]

MR. FLORSHEIM: And I'd have to bring this out and show it to the guard if he gave me a hard time. Eventually, they all got know me, and they'd leave me alone.

MS. SECKLER: [Laughter]

MR. FLORSHEIM: I still do this. I still peer at things like I'm a myopic professor, and try to figure out in my own mind, you know, that – the emotional thought process, how the thing is made, and reconstruct the whole process of the painting in my mind.

MS. SECKLER: Well, who were you peering at most closely in those days? Did you go through a phase of impressionism? Or did you keep more or less in the tunnel [inaudible]?

MR. FLORSHEIM: You know, I honestly don't know how to answer that because I think that – I always tried by instinct to incorporate what I was doing – what I saw into what I was doing in my own way. And of course, I look back, I can see things which are – you know, look like a half-baked [inaudible] or a half-baked Goya or, you know, a Mexican mural or something of that kind.

But that was only, you know, one or two paintings just to kind of catch on. But it was always what I talked about earlier. I guess I was still looking for these same forms, you know, and trying to put them together in my own way.

In Dan Rich's introduction to that show in '44, there's an interesting typographical error, which is

something that is on the record and will never be changed. But I remember the line so clearly because it just chilled me when it came out. There was a sentence in which he said that I had been living in Europe and I had come back after having done none of the usual polite still lives a la Cézanne or the nudes a la Renoir or the Paris landscapes that so many young American artists do. And there was a typographical error made in the catalog, and it said "some" instead of "none."

MS. SECKLER: Oh.

MR. FLORSHEIM: So forever, the statement which he was dreadfully upset about because it was exactly the contrary of his meaning – but evidently, if he was correct and my memory is correct, I didn't do that. I was always involved in – almost as though – and it's true, not "almost as though." I can't live without painting. It would be like living without eating. It is the only way that I can remain happy and a functioning person is to work. And it was that way young, and it's that way middle-aged, and I suppose it will be that way until I kick off.

MS. SECKLER: I know. Do you ever feel that you had any affinity with Vera Defilmis?

MR. FLORSHEIM: People have pointed it out to me, and I've noticed it. But I'm – in some of the work, I like a lot of it. But you know, I'm not particularly drawn to it.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm.

MR. FLORSHEIM: The interesting thing I'd like to mention, though, Boris Miley, you know, lived in Chicago for a couple of years. We got him a studio in our building, so we saw each other every day for two years. We had become – we were close friends. And one day Boris – you know Boris, don't you?

MS. SECKLER: Yes, um-hm.

MR. FLORSHEIM: You know, in his quiet, dignified, sweet way of talking, Boris said to me, "Dick, you know, Mondrian has been a big influence in your work." And I said, "Boris, I can't stand Mondrian. I don't like Mondrian. How could you say that?" And he said, "But, Dick, if you deny it or not, without Mondrian, you wouldn't be doing what you're doing." [Laughter]

MS. SECKLER: [Laughter]

MR. FLORSHEIM: And I guess it's true. And it – perhaps [inaudible], although I think that by the time I got to know her work, my work was already formed. Mondrian's work was done way before me. But it is an affinity, and I can see it.

MS. SECKLER: Yeah. Well, it's somewhat perhaps that [inaudible] that comes through. Also in her work it helps to accent [inaudible] almost form, sometimes, rather in groupings, in series. [Inaudible] I think that's why they put [inaudible].

MR. FLORSHEIM: Yes, I can see [inaudible].

MS. SECKLER: Certainly you could have arrived at it by very divergent roads.

MR. FLORSHEIM: Well, I think in the case of Mondrian, it is certainly true that I – you know, that this [inaudible] linear kind of concept, I really became aware of through Mondrian.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm.

MR. FLORSHEIM: As I say, his later work doesn't move me, but interests me. That [inaudible], I can see that we're parallel in a way. I realize that.

MS. SECKLER: He doesn't – rather more than you do [inaudible] special effects. You know, you've got [inaudible] away from the plane, where you tend to keep more of the plane, I believe.

MR. FLORSHEIM: Well, I believe that the thicker surface, you know, has its own integrity. It is basically a flat surface. And although you can suggest space, but I never try to actually make it, in a sense. Really, it's the color that introduces space. In terms of drawing –

[OFF THE RECORD]

MS. SECKLER: Back rec. Resuming an interview with Richard Florsheim in Provincetown on August 31st, 1968. We discussed in looking at the various panels – these are all panels, I take it, Richard?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Yeah, um-hm.

MS. SECKLER: This you prepared work as a ground –

[END OF DISK ONE]

MS. SECKLER: Back rec. Resuming an interview with Richard Florsheim in Provincetown on August 31st, 1968. We discussed in looking at the various panels – these are all panels, I take it, Richard?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Yeah, um-hm.

MS. SECKLER: This you prepared work as a ground – you were developing a painting. Each one has a different kind of color saturation. One is these orange bunchy – lots of oranges, another one in medium-scale blue, one in ocean green, others in lighter orange. And my question has been, how would you begin to develop a motif or an image on this surface, particularly because the surface is edited, already textured so beautifully. It seems complete at the moment.

MR. FLORSHEIM: Well, sometimes, you notice some of the underpaintings are sort of flat grounds, and it's really just a tone to work out of. But where it's – really it's kind of developed and spattered the way this one is, you – you know, it could start in a variety of ways. The panel itself could suggest something, or, you know, you could start it in the center and work out or the top towards the bottom or all over it at once.

MS. SECKLER: Would you have been thinking of something when you did it, or just following a liking for a certain kind of color and texture?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Well, what I could guess is that all my paintings are the descendants of all the ones I did before. And the ones I'm working on now are the ancestor of the ones that are to come. They're all interrelated with each other. And at all times, my head is full of things and ideas and bits and pieces of ideas of things that I want to try.

So that when I have a lot of these various underpaintings around – which I do with absolute freedom, you know, just because I enjoy doing them. I do a batch of them at a time sometimes, or one at a time, just for the sheer pleasure of doing them. And I have them around the studio. And when an idea comes along, it somehow may fit one of these panels that's there, or the panel itself, by being around, suggests something.

So that there's no – you know, no definite way of doing it. There's no one way of doing it. There are all kinds of ways, depending on what – I may start more than one painting at once – although usually, although I have an awful lot of underpaintings around at the time, I stay with one painting and work on it until it's finished. I don't work on more than one at the time the way many artists do.

MS. SECKLER: Oh, really?

MR. FLORSHEIM: But sometimes I work on more than one, too, or go back to something and try to complete it. But once – I guess mostly working on just one thing at a time, I try to give that one canvas absolutely everything I've got at that – every bit of energy, every bit of feeling, every bit of thought, all my preoccupation, until, as Matisse said, I can't think of anything further to do with it. Then I'm through with it. I never, but never would touch it again.

If it's a failure, I would rather start over again on a fresh panel with a fresh experience rather than try to repaint and redo and modify, because when I – put it this way. I think slowly and work fast. I think about it, feel a lot, and then when I work, I work with great intensity and with great rapidity. And then it either works or it doesn't. And that's it. I never try to patch it or to modify it.

I have a canvas sitting here in the studio right now that I did about two or three years ago. And I took it down and looked at it the other day and realized that it's a flop and that certain things should have been done that I didn't do. But I'll never touch it. One of these days when the moment is right, I'll start it over again on another canvas and it will turn out to be something completely different, I'm sure.

MS. SECKLER: Well, when did you – if you were to begin working on this blue one now, would it likely be with a linear figuration of some kind? Or would it be another kind of spotting --

MR. FLORSHEIM: No, I think the – more often than not, I'll work in sort of general areas before anything linear happens. And the chances are that, as I looked at it – and I had this sort of vague idea what I'm going to do with this because what I'm probably going to do is work in encaustic on that because it's --

MS. SECKLER: So far, what is it now?

MR. FLORSHEIM: It's just oil on jessel [phonetic], on a masonite panel.

MS. SECKLER: Uh-huh, yes.

MR. FLORSHEIM: And it's very absorbent at this stage. I haven't used any retouch varnish or anything else on it, so that it's ideally suited for encaustic. It's not really encaustic – cold wax, you know, Derlin's [phonetic] medium.

MS. SECKLER: What is the advantage of that over something else, as we're looking at this?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Well, it has a different, velvety, you know, matte quality that encaustic has and I prefer. A long time, you know, the majority of my work – oh, for nearly 10 years, I worked in almost nothing but encaustic. Now I'm working more in oil. But it has a – that quality of being able to use in pastel, as a glaze. In other words, the body of the paint is the same no matter how thick or transparent it is. And also that it sets up very rapidly so that you can paint over and over very quickly, which lends itself very well to my way of working.

But it's – you know, like why a composer decides one day to compose for a trio and the next day for

a symphony, you know, you feel that's what you want to do. And I have a strong feeling about – you know, for certain things. And encaustic is right for certain things, oil is right. Then I'll knock off for a month or two and do nothing but prints. I like that change of pace and – because you find yourself using up what you know with a given medium. I find that the easiest way to refresh is to switch.

Or if I've been painting large paintings, to paint some small ones. Or if I've been painting small ones, to paint large ones; if I've been painting things which have a vitreous quality the way you have, you know, working in glazes and varnish and so on, to work in something very matte and very sort of velvety in surface – these different things complement and refresh each other. And consequently – I try to leave a situation where I have alternatives. Sometimes, I'll paint for weeks with just using rollers, not using brushes – well, I don't use brushes anyway, hardly ever.

MS. SECKLER: Really?

MR. FLORSHEIM: No.

MS. SECKLER: In addition to rollers, what else do you use?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Well, I like these big putty knives and spatulas that painters – you know, house painters use for scraping spackle. I use them a great deal. I find – and curiously enough, the bigger the painting instrument, the more delicately you can use it. And I like the sharp edges of these big spatulas and the springiness against the panel.

Brushes I use for almost nothing except spattering and signing my name and an occasional stroke that can't be made any other way. But I like the quick covering of a large surface and the sudden accident, which you can modify and change, that comes from using a big spatula or a big gelatin roller, where you can pick up a quantity of paint and cover an area quickly, or work one area into the other, you know, wetted wet.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm. And you do this with the wax medium, the encaustic medium, too?

MR. FLORSHEIM: I've used rollers and – well, and knives, of course, you almost have to with the encaustic. You have to use a – something, you know, hard and tough to manage it. But I've even used the rollers with wax. Although it's rather awkward and messy, I like it.

MS. SECKLER: Small rollers [inaudible]?

MR. FLORSHEIM: I have all different kinds, you know, half-an-inch up to a couple of feet wide. And some of them hard rubber, some of them wood, some of them made of gelatin, so they're soft and pliable and so on. I don't have an awful lot of them here in Provincetown, but at home I have – in my own studio in Chicago, I have a whole wall of rollers, many of which I've made myself.

MS. SECKLER: And of course, you never use those over the white canvas, only over on ground?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Yes. I never paint on a white canvas. I don't like a white canvas. The white canvas is only something on which to put a ground, as far as I'm concerned.

MS. SECKLER: [Laughter]

MR. FLORSHEIM: Because, for one thing, from the white you can only work darker.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm.

MR. FLORSHEIM: I have to have a tone so that I can work both towards light and towards dark from the tone of the canvas. And from the white you can only go in one direction. From the tone canvas you can go in both directions.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm.

MR. FLORSHEIM: Also, it's a more agreeable surface. And the variations, you know, of the panel like this, which is spattered and where there's a kind of optical quality to it, suggests various things. And as you use the color over it, transparent and opaque, sometimes you kill the ground, sometimes you let it come through. And sometimes you can just glaze over it. It's playing against the final surface all the time in various ways, which the white can never do.

MS. SECKLER: You said you had an idea what you might do on this [inaudible]?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Well, you kind of hit at it before, you know.

MS. SECKLER: [Laughter]

MR. FLORSHEIM: It's obviously going to have something to do with Provincetown and sea and sky and open space. And you know, it suggests that. And yet, as I say that, I realize I might be lying through my teeth because it might turn out to be something else; I don't know. I really don't know. And as a matter of fact, I don't know what's going to happen until the canvas is finished.

I did a print a long time ago which was a big nude. It was a lithograph. And I got almost finished with it, and I decided this was for the birds. And I began redrawing it. And it turned out to be two sort of rocky prominences with a sort of crazy bridge going across it and an army marching across it. It was during the war period.

MS. SECKLER: You ought to tape that for your analyst. [Laughter]

MR. FLORSHEIM: And – no – I – it – well, it could possibly have that connotation. But I called it always *Landscape that Started out to be People*. [Laughter] Because there is this quality. You don't know. And it's like a writer when he starts a book, thinks he has an idea of what his character is going to do in that book, but as he writes the book, the characters begin to set up a conversation with him and begin to tell him what they're going to do.

And painting is the same way. It has to come alive for me. And then the painting begins to tell you. And you have to be sensitive to that. The painting is taking you this way. You have to be willing to let it go that way, rather than to force it into your original idea, in which case it would turn out badly.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm.

MR. FLORSHEIM: So that when I say that this may be sky and open area and water and so on, it might turn out to be something completely different. I don't really know, and I don't want to know because if I did know, I wouldn't do it.

MS. SECKLER: Yeah. You'll be surprised.

MR. FLORSHEIM: Right.

[OFF THE RECORD]

MS. SECKLER: To return a little bit to our story of how your work developed and what happened in your life, we had you into the – for your war service and back into Mexico. And I believe – is that quite when you were drafted. And we haven't found out what happened after that.

MR. FLORSHEIM: Well, after that I came back and I began teaching my own classes. I found that the best way of survival and continuing what I wanted to do was to organize my own classes, which I did. And from the time we got back to Mexico until a few years ago when I quit teaching entirely, I did that. I taught, you know, classes which I organized myself. And I did very well at it.

I had a large following and used to have a little waiting list, as a matter of fact, for both my afternoon and evening class. And I would never take more than 15 students in the class. And was lucky to get some, particularly in my night classes, interesting people who have developed and become, you know, respectable artists.

The day class, of course, was more inclined to be amateur painters, mostly women. And although it was pleasant and profitable, it wasn't very much of a challenge, except perhaps in a peripheral way, psychiatrically at times, for the rather neurotic suburban housewife who tends to take art classes forever and never can do any work on their own.

But I continued that way. And then, of course, in – oh, I guess about 1956, when I was 40 years old, then I began getting my first real breaks as a painter. And my work began selling. And of course, that also coincided with the period where, generally speaking, you know, American artists began selling. And I couldn't quite --

MS. SECKLER: Where were you showing?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Well, I was – I had a whole variety of dealers through the years. I think I was with something like 17 art dealers before I finally settled down where I am now and have been for the past, oh, I guess about 11 years at the Babcock Gallery and the Associated American Artists that handled my prints.

But before that I was with Jacques Seligmann in the contemporary American department. And before that was Joseph Luber, whom you may have run across, who had an excellent gallery of contemporary art, but who unfortunately was not very responsible financially when the artist had a rough time. And finally, the Artists Equity had to close the gallery because he owed the artists so much money.

MS. SECKLER: Is he still in Chicago, too?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Yes. I was with the Associated American Artists when they had their gallery in Chicago. And then when they closed, Elizabeth Nelson, who had worked for them, opened her own gallery. And when she closed her gallery, I had Goldschleger [phonetic], who was still my dealer in Chicago – has been for the past 10 or 12 years.

But certain breaks began happening for me. Alexander Elliot, who was then the art editor of *Time* magazine, became interested in my work. And he published a full page in color of one of my paintings in his *Three Hundred Years of American Painting*. And then *Time* did a cover story on my work.

But even before that had happened, things had begun happening, simply, I think, because the

whole general picture for the American artist changed. And suddenly there became a market. There were dealers. And galleries proliferated. And there were hundreds of thousands of Americans who became interested in contemporary American painting.

And I was fortunate that I was at the age that I was and when I was. And I couldn't believe it because I had had so many years of the experience of not being able to sell anything. I didn't sell anything for the first 14 years that I painted – nothing. Zero. Oh, you know, maybe a five-dollar etching to a relative or something like that, but you can't really call that having a following.

And I began making some – you know, a substantial – not an enormous amount, but a substantial living from my work. But I went on teaching for years afterwards because I couldn't quite believe it. I couldn't believe it would last. I couldn't believe it would go on. I still, even though it's still going on today – I still don't believe it can last, and I'm fully prepared in my own mind to go back to teaching again, if necessary. I'd rather not.

But in the last 10 years or so, I've had pretty complete freedom to do what I want to do and live where I want to live. We moved here to Provincetown for five months of the year about – oh, I've forgotten now, 1955, I guess, just about that same period. And I have the happiness of being able to do exactly what I want. I live where I want, paint what I want, and somehow or another enough people seem to want it so that I can make a very comfortable living out of it without teaching.

But I remember Yas Kuniyoshi, in the last years of his life, held down three teaching jobs. And of course, no American artist had a finer reputation or was more sought after than he was at the time. And I said to him one time – asked him, rather, "Why do you go on teaching?" And he said, "Because I don't believe that this can continue, you know. I don't want to be without a teaching job if my pictures stop selling."

Well, I felt that way for quite a few years. And then I finally said, "Oh, well, heck. You know, I could always go back to it if I have to. So I cut loose." And felt very strange about it for about six months. I felt like a ship without an anchor because I was so used to this routine and of being tied to a schedule and so on. But now I love it, of course. I have the kind of freedom that I never dreamed I would have.

MS. SECKLER: You still have coursework in Chicago that takes you back there for several months a year.

MR. FLORSHEIM: Yes. They get more and more tenuous every year, though. We spend less and less time there now. We're only there maybe four months, four-and-a-half months of the year. And I think mostly because I have an absolutely fantastic studio in an old – it's an anachronism, a survival of the nineteen century. It's a big studio building built by Lambert Cree [phonetic], who was Marshall Field's brother-in-law and who liked artists and built this studio building in his backyard, what was then his backyard, and which is now practically downtown Chicago.

And I have a great big barnlike six-room duplex studio, with another work studio down the hall for relatively nothing rent. And I keep it because it's full of stuff and paintings and crates and it's home base. And the best art supply store in the middle west is right in the same building. And it's just too convenient to give up. If they ever tear down the building, which has been threatened many times in the last few years, I don't know whether I'll ever go back or not. I really don't know.

A guy in Chicago, an interviewer, Studs Terkel, asked me one time why I stayed. And I said, well, I felt like, you know, my friend Nelson Algren, that Chicago is like a wife with a wooden leg. Maybe

she wasn't beautiful, but she was real. [Laughter]

MS. SECKLER: [Laughter]

MR. FLORSHEIM: And, you know, I love it and I hate it. And I have very ambivalent feelings about it.

MS. SECKLER: Do you still see many of those friends that you had when you were first there in those early years? Or have they moved out in various directions?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Most of them have moved out. There's hardly anybody left. They've either moved out or died. Let's see. I'm nearly 52. So that the people that I knew as a youngster are now in their early 60s, people like Eddie Millman and so on, who unfortunately died. And the whole group that I knew at that time has scattered.

The only one who has stayed that I knew then is Rudolph Wisenborn, who is a man of 86 or 87 now. There are a lot of artists in Chicago. But of the people that I knew, I can't think of a single one at the moment.

MS. SECKLER: So most of your associates, I take it, would now probably be people who are in New York in the winter while you're in[inaudible] Chicago.

MR. FLORSHEIM: Well, of course, my life is a – you know, more eastern than middle western because we're here in Provincetown almost half the year. I'm in New York frequently in the first of the winter. We stay there sometimes for as long as a month at a time if I have a show or something of that kind.

And my friendships are more and more in New York and here in this area, Boston and the Cape and so on, and in France. Of course, I spend two months of the year in Paris, because I do all my color prints at Morlo's [phonetic]. And since my involvement with the Associated American Artists, I've done a great many very large editions for them, 250 large color prints.

MS. SECKLER: When did that develop? We haven't covered that as much as we should.

MR. FLORSHEIM: Well, it started about 10 years ago when Silvan Cole took over the then-defunct Associated American Artists, which as you know was – had a very bad reputation as a very commercial and a very destructive kind of a situation. And through his energy and intelligence, has made it into really, I think, the finest print gallery in this country with excellent shows and a fine stable of artists and a fine reputation.

And I was one of the first artists that he approached when he first took over the gallery, and rather reluctantly, in view of the reputation the gallery then had, and really on the basis of my friendship for him, or my liking for him, because we weren't friends then – I was still calling him "Mr. Cole" and he was calling me "Mr. Florsheim."

But there was something about the guy that was right. And I said, for this guy I'll do anything. And I did an edition for him. And it turned into one of the most happy relationships for both of us that has ever happened, sold tens of thousands of my prints, and I've done many, many, many editions for him. Had three shows there, and they are my sole agents for my prints and have been for a great many years. I don't really remember, but I think it's 10 or 11 years now. And it's been a very fruitful relationship for both of us.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm. So when did you begin working in Paris?

MR. FLORSHEIM: Well, I went first to Paris – and this is – oh, there are so many stories I can think of. I feel like an old garbage can of recollections at this point. But in – when I got back from Mexico and I had had that show there, there was a certain amount of publicity about it and a certain amount of selling of my work in Chicago. Elizabeth Nelson had a show, and she did very well with it. We sold our car. And I told Carl Schniewind, who was then still alive, that I wanted to work at Morlo's and at La Courier's and gain some more experience.

And Carl called Curt Valentin. And Curt Valentin gave me letters of introduction to La Courier and Morlo. And I've worked – oh, I gave up La Courier because I don't particularly care for metal processes. But I've ever since been going to Morlo, and usually twice a year, to do my prints. And of course, having an active dealer, who has been actively selling my work – there is a demand for larger editions so that there is an economic reason for going as often as possible. So I usually go twice a year to make my prints.

I have a little story to tell you about Curt Valentin, the kind of a guy he was – is what I originally started to tell you. When I got back to New York after this six months at Morlo's and La Courier's, just making prints for nobody, just for myself. I would make 10 or 12 prints of anything I did. And, you know, nobody wanted them, particularly, at that point.

And I went up to Curt Valentin to thank him for giving me these letters of introduction. And he greeted me very warmly, and then he said, "This is no way to thank me." And I was sort of shy about people, and I was sort of taken aback. And I said, "Well, what do you mean?" And he said, "Well, why didn't you bring the prints along to show me?" And I said, "Well, I didn't even dream you'd be interested in seeing them. Why would you want to see them?" And he said, "Well, after all, that's what you were doing. You're an artist. Come on. Bring them back and show them to me."

So I went back, and I got the prints, and brought them into the gallery. And he looked at them and, "Oh, I like that one. I like that one." He didn't like all of them, but he liked some of them very much. So he picked up the phone while I was sitting there in the gallery, and he called Ambroshowitz [phonetic] in Cincinnati and said, "There's a guy here with some color prints that I think you ought to have in your Biennale. Do you think you'd be interested?" And he got in touch with several other people.

And this was his way of telling me that he liked what I did. He asked for nothing from me. I never saw him again. Just because, out of the kindness of his heart he did these things, and I've never forgotten that kindness and that enthusiasm.

MS. SECKLER: Yes.

MR. FLORSHEIM: So there, among dealers.

MS. SECKLER: I think that's why he was such a beloved figure among the artists [inaudible].

MR. FLORSHEIM: Oh, he was a darling. Until the day I die, I'll never forget him, although I only saw him twice in my life. And little things like that that, when you think of the harshness and the competitiveness and some of the nastiness that is prevalent in the creative professions, if people would only stop for a moment and realize that.

By – you know, Dorothy, I made up my mind. I feel maybe even a little self-conscious about putting this on paper, but by golly, it ought to be. But when the going was rough for me, and there were these few people that were kind to me, like Carl Schniewind and Dan Rich, and so on, and Curt

Valentin and others, Pijoán, that if I ever made it, I would return the favor by doing everything I could for younger artists that I felt had a grain of ability.

And one of the greatest satisfactions of my life has been doing just that. And I make it a point of trying never to say anything destructive about an individual artist or to put anybody down. But when I find somebody who has something and I find myself in a position where I can give him the least little boost, I do it. And it's led to some of the most rewarding and happy experiences of my life by so doing – finding a gallery for a guy, recommending him to a museum or to a collector, or whatever it is. And it's given me great happiness and great joy. And I wish there were more of that, rather than the kind of competitiveness that's so hard and so harsh.

MS. SECKLER: I don't see why the art community couldn't have more of it, really. Well, that's a good nice place to wind up on. We'll go back next year.

MR. FLORSHEIM: All right. Appreciate it.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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