



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Lila Katzen, 1964
September 5

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Lila Katzen on September 5, 1964. The interview was conducted in Provincetown, Massachusetts by Dorothy Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Miss Katzen is a Baltimore Tiffany Prize Winner

Interview

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing Lila Katzen in Provincetown on September 5th 1964. Lila Katzen is an artist who has shown her work in one-man shows and also individually in galleries and museums in Baltimore and New York and in Provincetown. Lila, I was interested in the ideas you were expressing when we talked a while ago about the way an artist develops, the ways his work, imagery, and forms take shape. And I'd like you if possible to recall some of that and talk about it in terms of your own career.

LILA KATZEN: Well, one of the things that I've realized recently is the fact that I thought I was doing a whole series of work that had developed in the last 2 or 3 years with shapes and forms and images that seemed to me to be completely new and startling, and as I look back to some of the older work I realize that these shapes are not as startling and new, that they were exactly the things I had been working with over all these years and that the differences possibly might be the context that these images are now in. It's amazing to me but many times I've been asked to see another artist's work they will say come and see the new work. It's amazing in the sense that the new work is generally related to exactly what they've been doing before and the difference is that the intrinsic forms have had some kind of shift or change both in scale or balance or handling or something that they themselves may be completely unaware of, and it is only at certain moments that an artist gets an objective insight into what he's been doing. Actually I think that you start off doing a certain thing with a certain kind of movement or gesture or sensibility of color and shape and this intrinsic form is with you. I don't think you suddenly decide to do a thing, I think it evolves from what you are, what kind of person you are, the kind of physical makeup you have, and how you react and relate to all kinds of stimuli. And sometimes you will see - I've seen certain people's works that have looked maybe at the time completely opposite; for instance, someone may start off with an organic kind of form and then suddenly move into what might be considered a stark geometric type of form. Actually the kind of interval and intensity involved are so similar that they are practically the same thing. It's just another facet of the same coin. And I know that when I look back through some of the things that I've been doing, I've been hooked at various times with certain people whose work I've loved and I found have influenced me, and many times I have to deliberately turn my back on their work to find out where I am or who I am in relation to that person or myself.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You mentioned Miro before.

LILA KATZEN: Yes, in the early years I discovered Miro as everybody discovers somebody, and found that everything he did was marvelous to me, the king could do no wrong, everything was right and I became so enamored of everything that I found myself automatically looking for his work and buying books and prints and pouring over it and so on. And I think I lived through that in the sense that I was able to put him aside and to move onto something else. I can now look back with fond affection but I think every artist goes through a period when he or she becomes involved with some particular person's work because they identify with it, there's a certain need for understanding their own drive in that direction. And sometimes you go through several people like that. You digest them and swallow them as it were. And it's important to be able to do that and then come through it. The coming through it is really the major test.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And when you had finished this phase in which you had absorbed a great deal from Miro and then had sort of put it aside, to what extent did your work at that period look like Miro, or were you aware of the ways in which you had changed it, oh, interval, scale, beat, or whatever?

LILA KATZEN: I don't think in the beginning that I was very much aware. In fact, if anyone had told me at the time that Miro was influencing me I wouldn't have believed it. I felt that I had a great affection for the man's work and forms and I felt an insight into what he was doing and my own work seemed my own at the time. I think every artist feels that way and it was only a little period afterwards that I could look and see that a kind of organic amoeba-type shape would come through and the kind of openness of the structure, the loosely coiled and woven lineal forms and the kind of floating of shapes and so on. This came through in the work, and of course the surface of the canvas was something that I always had a natural bent for. That's what I mean by the intrinsic form of the artist. There are some painters who are what I would call architectonic, that overused word, where they work way into the canvas and where they must control the canvas constantly.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I wonder if you could talk about that a little more.

LILA KATZEN: Well, the thing that I have always been concerned with and which has never ever left me has been the sense of the surface that I work on. I've always worked across the surface and I think that possibly I sense it in relation to my own structure. This may not be true of other people but I'm quite large and I have this sense of being able to take my hand and move it across the surface and sense the whole canvas as it were, not only through my eyes - grabbing it through my eyes - but actually physically so that in many cases the larger the canvas the bigger the challenge because it's a question of trying to hold on to a large canvas both through my insight and the physical means at my disposal. So possibly this might be part of it. But I have always worked along the surfaces and related to an image that was not controlled by the outer edges of the canvas. The canvas for me was never a confine. I always felt that, of course, even more so today with what I'm doing now. I think I've realized what it was I was trying to make aware to myself and that is that the canvas is almost like a mirror and that the image I'm involved with is one which is seen fleetingly in that mirror and it's on its way some place else. The image is generally intact and yet it may depart so that it is kind of a life thing. Simultaneously it is both a facet and the whole thing at the same time, and the canvas is not canvas nor is it space in that calculated sense. It is to me again a kind of life force and the forms themselves while they are hard and crisp and emblematic and defined and so on, to me they are magical and flowing and have great meaning in terms that are life meanings that they go beyond any kind of calculated image. And I don't think I could ever become concerned with a calculated image, I mean everything has to come through the sense of my hands. Someone asked me if I used masking tape, for instance. I could never do that. I could never take masking tape and tape an image. That to me would be alien to this force that I feel comes through the color which to me is magical, maybe in the old Taoistic sense that the color itself has a magical light, a property, the shapes themselves, the edges, the forms are alive and have personality, and if the painting fails it fails because the personalities are not convincing and the magical force is abortive or not whole, and when the painting is a success it's kind of like a gleaming, live, magical image that you get intact. And I myself when I sense these things when I'm working with them I don't have what you would call a found image. I don't seek all over the canvas for some found purpose, the image is within me intact and the struggle is for it to come out intact and I have often wished that I had eyes like movie lanterns so that they could project this image in its full intensity and glory on the canvas. And the problem has really been to hold on to it and free it from inside me. That's why I would not locate my work as specifically hard edge painting because I feel the painting itself goes beyond just concern with a means or mannerism and has a deeper meaning than that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Now when you say that the form is inside and then it's real and sort of complete, does that mean that as you approach the canvas it's very clearly imagined in your mind's eye, the full character of a series of shapes so that very little change place in the working out of the canvas? I gather this isn't true but I wonder if you could make that a little more clear?

LILA KATZEN: Well, I'll say that I do have and do see the complete image in my head before working, during working. For instance, sometimes when I might waken, and I've had this happen, early in the morning I'll have a series of images go through my head in a state of, you know, being half awake and sometimes I'll be able to draw very quickly some of the things that go through my head. Other times I don't even bother because I can't hold on to them, they happen one after the other. But in working an image can become so dynamic and complete that it is actually trying to paint a vision that I see very much in relation to the kind of thing that the oriental painters did. They would put themselves sort of in a state of grace and then they would do in a fell swoop a particular image. If I can work up the amount of intensity and concentration, which is required, then I can do that, you see. And I feel that those are the most valid because they come through a period of actual focusing concentration of both my physical energies and my image. I once read something about Matisse, which I did not quite understand, but I understand now, and that is his necessity to control the nervousness in his arm to be able to then lash out and have it absolutely right in one fell moment. Then it's complete, intact, it isn't a found image. I understand it now. And it's the same thing. If I have to laboriously develop an image in a kind of mechanized way, for me it loses its life force and I don't feel that the image that I'm working with are romantic images in the least but they are complete and intact things and they cannot be worked out in any kind of prescription way. I've tried that but it doesn't work, you wind up with something that becomes decorative or a design or, you know, just a motif and the difference between a motif and a painting is the difference of worlds. And it is the world, I think, of human involvement. And that's why - of course the pictures that result don't always come out, they very rarely come out exactly as I imagine in my mind. Of course this is the torture actually, that one can't seem to be able to reach the bottom of the pit in a way. There's always something else and something else.

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is I would think a rather unusual way of working and imaging today. So often artists in recent times have seemed to go to the canvas with no preconceived image and to discover an image in the process of putting down something. Then the form may emerge and it may be the same from as you've said, you know, in structured form but not something that they apparently had clearly imagined before the act of painting. That at least was truer perhaps a few years back.

LILA KATZEN: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So that your way of having a clear visual image of the totality is it the total image?

LILA KATZEN: It's the total image. The total image.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's very remarkable I think.

LILA KATZEN: It is in a certain sense of – actually there have been particular groups of people who, as I say, the Chinese did this and of course there was a certain area through the Middle Ages when it was done also. But I know that this is something that has happened as a result I guess of the kinds of things that I'm involved with.

DOROTHY SECKLER: This was not always true then? I mean, for instance, this represents possibly a distillation of being so intensely concerned with certain kinds of images and structure for so many years?

LILA KATZEN: Yes. That I think relates to the fact that I feel that everything is the same only different and in the early years I suspected, you know, this kind of ability to discern an image and would not use an immediate image like that but would sometimes push it aside. But when I would go into a great period of lengthy painting I couldn't put it aside because certain images would reoccur and reoccur and reoccur and the anxiety developing by the reoccurrence of certain images had to be alleviated by the projection of that image. So that I became aware that there are particular forms I identify with, particular colors I identify with, and that have a great meaning for me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I was fascinated by what you said about the fact that your forms are not confined by the sense of the limits of the canvas. That is a concept that seems to – I feel that for the first time today artists are aware of the possibility of working more this way, but I wonder if you could talk a little more about that. Has this been true for a long time or is it something that's happened recently?

LILA KATZEN: Well, I think that it's something that has happened over the last few years although that I've probably always been aware of. I think you go through that period of youth and studentship trying to find out who you are and where you are and I know that there were certain natural bents that I had that I put aside in suspicion and had to go through all kinds of things before I came back to what I was to begin with. I think that's perfectly natural. But the images themselves to me again are life things, are not a juxtaposition of color and shape by themselves. For me that the image in total, completely in total in its environment as such is unimportant only insofar as it makes the image exist in its totalness. And it is something which is alive and moving to some place else or coming from within, which in a lot of the pictures I'm involved with *Penumbra*, for instance, is a picture which has forms that come from inside off-center and emanate to the surface in a series of kind of repeated movements which – actually the canvas is quite flat but to me I see these images as laying on the surface and emanating at the same time. And there are shapes that are phosphorescent and yet hold an edge, that seem to move out and yet lay on the surface, that seem to be fixed and yet are in movement, that seem to be contained and yet are not. And it's kind of this ambiguousness that I'm interested in and yet within the context of a form that's a kind of thing that would be magical in the sense that you sense it as a totality immediately – well, it isn't even a sensing of it, it's there, it's concrete, it's a fact. And it's a fact that has meaning beyond the so-called abstract of art, I mean which has always existed.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You must have gone through phases I imagine when teachers would have told you, well now you know this has to be plastic and you design within the space and so on. Was this a distraction or did you quickly overcome it?

LILA KATZEN: Well, I'll tell you one of the nicest things that ever happened to me was at a point when I was studying with Hans Hofmann and we had to put our pictures out. At that time I was working also with a series of a kind of rhythmical gestures that float across the surface and some of my fellow students resented the fact that these shapes and so forth sat on the surface and they called them decorative pictures, and Mr. Hofmann at the time made a statement which I never forgot because I loved it so. Coming to my defense, he said, "decorative only in a good sense as Matisse is decorative." That was a very wonderful thing and he understood exactly what I was involved with. But there have been in the past certainly certain teachers who felt that this was not the way to paint, that this was not deep, meaningful painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You nevertheless do use shapes that seem very considered. For instance your "Tondos", your round-shaped forms, seem very right for the images in them and so on, so that they are certainly a part of the space, but I just would like to get a little closer into differentiation ...

LILA KATZEN: Oh, yes....

DOROTHY SECKLER: ...they're not limited by the space in the traditional sense, even a Mondrianesque sense but it is of course...

LILA KATZEN: It is in a sense that the image lives and has its own meaning. No, the tondo is right because the

forms are completely part and parcel of the tondo. The tondo and the forms are one. The tondo, in other words, the round-shaped canvas and the image are part and parcel - like skin and bone. And as a matter of fact, I'm working now with some ideas and some canvases that I've started where some are u-shaped, that is - well, I don't know whether you'd call it a u-shape but it's like a shield-shape, and where certain images, for instance, have absolutely decreed that they need this kind of shape to exist within and to be part of the shape and yet beyond it. And this is the thing that I'm involved with right now. I've done, for instance, some paintings, which are diamonds, and yet the space that they exist is not really space. It is to me an environment to that diamond so therefore I have decided to eliminate that and the diamond itself becomes the important thing, the thing that's necessary for the form. And this is what I'm involved with right now. So that you've already begun to decide where I am.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. So the concept, the older concept of positive and negative space as being in a perfect balance has very little interest for you in the sense that yours is always positive?

LILA KATZEN: It's always positive. There is no negative. And there is no concrete and non-concrete, it's all concrete. And there is also no sense of this being a closed circuit.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's an interesting point.

LILA KATZEN: It isn't a closed circuit. Not at all.

DOROTHY SECKLER: No. Very good. I'm very glad you said that. I think this is something that's coming into being and that certain perceptive people are, you know, feeling this new freedom and I'm very much interested in it. Anything you could say about this feeling of being free of the closed circuit I would very much like to hear.

LILA KATZEN: Well, the thing is that we artists always for some reason or another - well, the obvious reasons - we've always decided that a specific thing is right, you know, and that this is the only answer. And of course the specific thing is right and the only answer because we make it so as a result of our own development. But then somehow we're free for a moment and we look and we see well, we've made all the rules and we've made all the decisions and actually the time has come to maybe make a new set and discard the old, or it may be to discard all of them and make a form that is most meaningful to us at this moment in life, in time. And this what is most meaningful to us can be meaningful to all but then they would have to move on to something else perhaps, and that's exactly it. I think we've gone through a tremendous creative time and I think that we're going now into another which has something else and which will be just as important, perhaps more important than what went before. and that, of course, is the most marvelous thing about life: it's marvelous now, it was marvelous then, and it'll even be better tomorrow.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I'm sure there will be some timid souls who will feel rather lost that the old rules are melting away and that it's now possible to - well, to bring a motif or an image into being in many different ways: you can extend the canvas, you can change the shape, you can build out or dig in, there are no holds barred. And this is an area that would seem to belong to the bold, and that people who feel safer when they are within certain rules will find it terribly difficult to

LILA KATZEN: Well, that's true. But I think that has always existed.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, that's true. So that we can expect you to, I think, move into a period now when many painters will feel, as you do. It seem perhaps that the work of art might be a little more human in a sense if it is relieved of these earlier aspects of commodity production in which the picture was within certain four-square dimension and the whole, whatever it contained was sort of all related to those four edges and so on. Maybe there's a feeling of breaking away from that sense of it being such a confined kind of object, or in which the object was more important than the person that made it.

LILA KATZEN: Well, I think that there is definitely room now for other things to happen. There has been a generation of painters who have been sort of caught in the middle where they were doing certain things, which were alien to what was happening around them. I think alien in the sense that it was another way of working. For instance, it's surprising to me, coming from Baltimore as I do, to see other people doing things that are not the same but that are interesting to me because the kind of image they're involved with is also not a found image but an intact image, and there are many facets of it. There are people who seem so involved with, you know, the kind of color dynamics and so on. But still I think that they're all heading towards similar goals, if one can head towards a goal.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Would you like to talk a little bit about any of the earlier aspects of your work or of teachers who have been important to you in any way, or do you feel you are a self-made artist?

LILA KATZEN: Well no. I think - well, actually I painted and have drawn my whole life and I never knew anything else, it never occurs to me to do anything else. I know that there are a lot of artists who did other things and

then decided that they wanted to be an artist through various circumstances that sort of made it right. In my case my grandfather was a painter and, of course, he did fresco and gold leaf and all that sort of thing, bowls of fruit, angels on the ceiling, etc. and it never occurred to me that I would be anything else. I always drew and painted and so on. And as I was born in New York I gravitated toward schools that were interested in that development. I attended Washington Irving High School and, of course, in the early years one of the things I thought would be really marvelous to be was to be an illustrator...

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... *December 2, 2004*