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**Oral history interview with Robert S. Neuman,  
1991 May 1-June 19**

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Robert Neuman on May 1-June 19, 1991. The interview took place in Winchester, MA, and was conducted by Robert Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

ROBERT BROWN: To begin, could you just talk a little bit about your family, your upbringing. You're from the state of Idaho?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, from the town of Kellogg, in the upper part of the state, an old mining town that has the biggest silver mine in the country. I was born and grew up there. There are no art galleries or artists or anything else there. My parents owned a small hardware store in the town and I worked there after school. For some reason I just began drawing when I was very young. I think it was because my mother and father worked in the store and I was left to my own devices much of the time.

So I began drawing. I remember as very young boy I would listen to the radio -- Dick Tracy, or Popeye, something like that -- and I would draw what I heard. It was a case of drawing with a pencil and a piece of paper substituting what you hear with something visual. I found that interesting to do, and I remember drawing endlessly, but all I had was a pencil and paper and I yearned for the day when I could have a bottle of ink and a pen and paper. It took a long time but I finally got a pen and I was in seventh heaven then. I did many, many pen-and-ink drawings.

ROBERT BROWN: A fascination when you could enlarge what you could express? I mean, looking back, or was it a different kind of mess, or --

ROBERT NEUMAN: No, that pen and ink was more precise lines, more design, and blacker, clearer to the eye, and I liked that a lot. And I thought as a young boy that this must be something very professional to have a bottle of ink and a pen. Then I remember seeing in the cartoon strips that many artists did when they were young they were interested in cartoons because of the drawing aspect of it and the shorthand of cartooning. I couldn't do that with pencil, I thought I really had a luxurious situation when I had a bottle of ink and a pen to draw with.

ROBERT BROWN: Did your parents encourage you?

ROBERT NEUMAN: My parents left me alone as a child. I worked in the store, and went to school, and played in the high school and all that sort of thing. But I still had this yearning to draw. I think it was because in a country environment there was lots of time for oneself, as opposed to living in a city. Many artists, I noticed, had come from either semi-rural environments or had a great deal of time when they were young to themselves, to just meditate and absorb things around them.

I think that was my case also. All of this either came out as pen and ink on paper. And I enjoyed it very much. I didn't have any colors, no crayons, all I had was a pencil for along time and then pen and ink.

ROBERT BROWN: How old would you have then?

ROBERT NEUMAN: It went on for several years. I know I started when I was probably in fifth or sixth grade and went on from then. I had an exhibition in Boston many years later and it was well received here at Pace Gallery on Newbury Street before they moved to New York. My parents at the same time came by train to visit to Boston and I took them to the exhibition. Someone there said, "When did your son doing art work?" And she said, "Since he was old enough to pick up a pencil." Neither of my parents encouraged me to do any art work. They said, "If that's what you're interested in doing, go ahead and do it." They left me alone very much.

ROBERT BROWN: You didn't detect any pressure to pursue some career.

ROBERT NEUMAN: No, except when I decided to go to college. First I went to the university and it wasn't satisfying me so I went to professional art school in California. My parents did say at that time, "Whatever you study," as many people do, "try to find something whereby you can make a living from it." So I studied what was called applied art; today they'd call it commercial art or graphic design or something.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it fairly hard living in a mining town for your parents?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. My mother was an immigrant from Sweden, my father's parents had been there for a long time. No one had any excess cash and of course the Depression was on for a while. They didn't waste much. My mother knitted some of our socks and sweaters. They made things last a long time. I'm the only child but I three or four cousins in the town whom I related to almost on a sister-brother basis.

No one was interested in art. On the other hand, no one was un-interested in it, they just let you do whatever you wanted to do. And there was no way to be interested in art, since there were no museums or galleries or painters or anything else.

ROBERT BROWN: As a mining town, was it fairly wide open? Was it very raucous, or by then was it sort of settled down to --?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, I'd say it lay somewhere in the middle. At one time it was a wild town earlier on before we came there. Most of the miners were unmarried, so you can imagine what happened on payday in a mining town. Every other door on the main street was a bar, there were brothels and so forth. But they maintained good order in the town. It was pretty raucous, though, on paydays and holidays. They had "Miners Picnic" once a year for many years -- if everybody except the women didn't have a beard, you were fined \$10 and put in jail for a few hours, something like that, and there were parades about the mining industry and so on. Most of that's gone today, but they have started now to put in mining museums and the like.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you participate in any of this indirectly as a boy?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh yes. I was working in my father's hardware store, so all the businesses were involved somehow. I was in the marching band at the high school as a young boy and we were in the various parades in the different towns. They had pageants on the football field at night, very elaborate ones showing the history of the mining industry -- Lewis and Clark passing through the area, different Indian encampments, early settlers, Father Cataldo and the Jesuits coming there and teaching the Indians to farm and build and how to avoid floods, all that sort of thing. It was quite colorful for a long time.

ROBERT BROWN: So you graduated from the local high school in 1944, in the middle of the War.

(Neuman confirms) And you enrolled at the University of Idaho in Moscow and you went into fine arts there.

ROBERT NEUMAN: That's right. Before I graduated, while in high school they had one art class -- the primary purpose of the high school was to prepare people to go into the mines and work for the mining companies, of which there were many; all over the hills were these mines. So I took the one art course and I enjoyed it but there was some regulation that you couldn't take more than one, and I didn't know until many years later when my mother told me that she had gone to the school's superintendent and asked if I couldn't be allowed to take more than one art course. After some discussion they allowed me to take that course three times -- it was a very basic thing: we painted wooden plates and we made some drawings of things, very basic drawings, but I found that very enjoyable, and I hadn't realized that she'd gone to all this trouble until many, many years later, after I was out of art school. But that was a godsend.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you use paints at all in these classes?

ROBERT NEUMAN: We used them on the wooden plates and things for Christmas presents as they would do in public schools, but I think I was introduced to oil paints there. I can't recall how exactly, but I know that the teacher had done painting at the university and showed us some of his work.

ROBERT BROWN: Were they exciting to you, as paintings?

ROBERT NEUMAN: They were adequate. They were landscapes of the wheat fields down around Moscow, Iowa, in the Peloose [phon.sp.] area but he didn't practice art any more, he was just teaching the course in high school.

ROBERT BROWN: So you were effectively pretty much on your own still, weren't you, even when you were in these classes.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh yes, definitely. During high school before entering the university I got the urge to try oil painting and didn't know how to do it technically. I didn't ask the teacher much because he was very busy. My father's hardware store had a paint department for housepaints, automobiles or whatever, and at that time there were very small tubes that could be added to other colors to change colors. So I would borrow a few of those tubes and on weekends when my parents, say, went fishing on the lakes I would take these paints and some canvas I found somewhere and make some rudimentary paintings of the landscapes and lakes and various views you had of nature there.

I'd hike down the railroad track a few miles and find something interesting. There were float houses on the lakes from years ago when lumberjacks had floated log booms down the lakes. So I painted those. There's still one of them in Kellogg, I know. They were painted without any technical understanding, and the colors of course weren't artists' colors. So I was lucky I got anything.

ROBERT BROWN: But you were looking, and then recording what you saw.

ROBERT NEUMAN: That's right. I tried to make it just like a photograph, more or less, but I didn't know because I'd never had any instruction.

ROBERT BROWN: Still, there was something of accuracy about them, was there?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh yes, oh it was quite accurate. I seemed to understand perspective and

everything without any instruction. No, it was pretty good, but I had seen very few oil paintings, there was no place to see them, we had no art books, nothing. I couldn't have any relationship, say, to landscape painting vis-a-vis French or English or Italian, like you might have if you were in a school somewhere.

ROBERT BROWN: This was a pretty intense kind of experience, both the drawing and the painting, weren't they. Did you get extremely absorbed by it?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh yes, that's all I thought about, really. I wasn't terribly social, although I was on the basketball team in high school, played in the band and would go to dances with everybody -- I was social enough, I guess, but my main concern, really, was drawing and painting. I knew that in the back of my mind some place I wanted to go somewhere and learn more about it, but as a high school kid I didn't know how you did that; especially in a mining town.

ROBERT BROWN: There wasn't much encouragement to go further in education.

ROBERT NEUMAN: No. My father thought I would probably just stay there and run his business and he would retire. But no one said anything to me about going to the university or to art school, although my father had gone to the university, starting his first year in the Depression and had to leave and haul gravel on highway instead. My friends started going to university and I wasn't going any place, so some of them suggested I come to the university, and that's how I went. Neither of my parents suggested that I go to college. Then, when I brought up the point, they didn't object at all, they said "well, if that's what he wants to do, let him go try it," something of that nature. I remember one person even suggesting I go to one fraternity house at the university and my father objected because he'd been in a different one and wanted me to go to the one he'd been in! So that was probably one of his interests in why I was going to the university.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you find it when you got there?

ROBERT NEUMAN: I found myself bewildered, because the high school education I'd received in which on my own part I hadn't done well, I wasn't a very good student, and when I went to the university I had to adjust and all but I had a job there working in the kitchens. I enjoyed the art classes but I just wasn't developed enough, or my mind wasn't in the right place, for the psychology and various other courses, although one teacher of an English class said if I knew more about literature he thought my writing was pretty good. I think I had little stories which were imaginative and he probably related to that, but grammatically, et cetera, they were pretty bad. So I didn't do very well at the university, I had just C's, except in the art courses.

ROBERT BROWN: What were they like? Could you describe them?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. It was a small art department at the University of Iowa in Moscow and we had a woman chairman of it who'd studied at the Royal Academy in Sweden, named Mary Kirkwood. And the commercial artist there, named Alfred Dunn [he spells it] was essentially a watercolorist. He got me involved in doing the various logos and spot designs for the University of Iowa's yearbook that year. He really pushed me to do it, so I did it and had no more idea what I was doing when I began than anything, because every unit of the yearbook had a logo -- for fraternity houses, for social clubs, for various activities, et cetera, and you had to make some kind of a design some way.

So I got out my pen and bottle of ink again and started drawing with that. As I look back on them now they're not very interesting, but they seemed to like them and printed my drawings in the yearbook.

ROBERT BROWN: Were they supposed to be sort of shorthand symbols?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, they were symbols and designs, more or less, but you had to abstract them, really -- if you took an object symbolizing a certain activity, you had to reduce it to symbol status some way. That is a form of abstraction, actually, so I started it then and didn't even know I was doing it. Miss Kirkwood, the painting teacher, left me alone. We did a lot of floral pieces and such. Later I decided to leave there and go to professional art school in San Francisco. She was very encouraging, interested that I do that. She didn't try to slow that down at all.

ROBERT BROWN: She wasn't resentful of your choice.

ROBERT NEUMAN: No, she thought it was a good idea. I probably would never have gone to a professional art school in California if I hadn't heard other students talking about it -- some of them were saying there were art schools down there where you could study essentially art with minimum academics, except for art history and maybe a few other courses but not much.

ROBERT BROWN: (laughing) That appealed to you, huh?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, that appealed to me and I was inquisitive: "What kind of a place is this? Here I'm studying here courses in psychology and things that don't make a lot of sense to me. My mind is elsewhere, or else I've got a different orientation toward visual things."

So I thought I wanted to do that, but unfortunately the draft came along and the War was continuing, so I couldn't stay at the university very long, I was only there one and a half semesters, then I had to go in the Army.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have any choice as to what you wanted to do in the Army?

ROBERT NEUMAN: No, but once I got in, I heard there was a Special Services unit which painted things and did entertainment and plays and all sorts of things, even painting KEEP OFF THE GRASS signs. So I tried to get in there but they didn't agree with me and put me in an anti-aircraft battery on a radar mount. That was at Fort Bliss, El Paso, Texas. So I didn't get into any Special Services.

When I got out of the Army I went back to the University of Idaho again [sic, not to Iowa] and that's when I heard about the professional art schools.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you look back on the Army experience as fairly a waste of time in terms of what you wanted to do?

ROBERT NEUMAN: At the time I was a pretty young kid and I thought it was kind of adventuresome, and coming from the mountains of Idaho and the foothills of the Rockies, I was accustomed to hiking miles, hunting and fishing, one thing and another, so when I got into the Army, hiking around wasn't any problem for me. For some of the city kids was. And firing a rifle was easy for me and I immediately got an Expert badge in rifle. That part was not difficult for me at all. But I never went overseas. My outfit went to, I think, Okinawa or Iwo Jima, I don't know, but I was transferred to the Air Force to radio school for more radar and the like.

But I didn't find the Army so frustrating. I'd grown up in a little mining town and never travelled, so suddenly I was sent to Florida, to California, to Wisconsin, to Chicago -- I sort of enjoyed that aspect. I didn't like the idea that there was a war going on but as far as the Army itself, it provided a certain discipline and I think it helped a lot of young people. Because they led pretty healthy lives -- they

got up early, they exercised, they had dental and health care, a lot of them had never had that before. I can remember many people in the Army who hadn't seen doctors or dentists in a long time. It really wasn't a bad thing for many people.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it a time of patriotism in, for example, the university, or Kellogg, do you recall?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, there was always patriotism but there wasn't wild patriotism because they understood that you could die. And many of my classmates did who were in submarines, Marine Corps; they never came home. Everybody assumed everybody was against the Axis and so forth. I tried to enlist in the Navy, one of my cousins had, but they wouldn't have me because of my eyes and my feet, so I had to go into the Army. Near Kellogg there was a huge Navy base called Farragut, on Ponderay [phon.sp.] Lake, the second largest in-land Navy base in the U.S., I think. The sailors often came to Kellogg on weekend liberty and to see friends or something.

ROBERT BROWN: You were discharged in '46?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, I guess it was '46. And I went back to the University, just long enough to get out of there and go back to California to professional art school.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you know much more about them by then? How come you went --

ROBERT NEUMAN: No, I just heard that you could get into things deeper there in terms of art. In other words, at the University of Idaho the facilities weren't that grand, it was pretty much painting, commercial art, and anatomy, but there wasn't much in the way of printing, ceramics, architecture, or anything like that. Now there is but there wasn't then. So I thought I'd like to go where I could get deeper into the things and find out what it is about art -- see, I was discovering that art had quite a breadth to it -- what it was that would interest me. Would it be architecture, ceramics, jewelry-making, furniture design, what would it be? I knew that painting interested me but I thought I could do that, so I had the GI Bill and I went down there.

ROBERT BROWN: You went to the California School of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, in 1947.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes; just a mile from the Berkeley city limits. I liked it immensely when I got there because suddenly I was among a bunch of people who'd think the same way, who were really interested in art. It didn't matter whether you were a sculptor or a ceramist, you still were involved in art, it was a 24-hour-a-day thing. Then I went through that and to graduate school also.

ROBERT BROWN: As you said a little earlier, you studied applied art as they called it, commercial design.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, because when I left and moved down my parents said, "Try to make a living out of it." So I looked around and saw this commercial art. So I never took oil painting in undergraduate school. I received straight A's in almost everything except color, so I graduated with highest honors. But when I finished my Bachelor's degree in Applied Art, they called it, I wasn't happy and didn't seem fulfilled. I wanted to paint.

I had been painting at home in a small apartment and my wife then was going to Mills College and we lived near there. I was painting in the living room and wasn't studying painting at the college, I was just doing it on my own. So I still didn't know too much about technical things. But I had taken other art courses --in drawing, and watercolor, lithography, sculpture, many things -- but never oil painting.

So I did this all on my own and submitted some of them to museums around there and won a prize, at the Oakland Museum; one of the first paintings I submitted. (Brown laughs) So I was pretty surprised. I was painting on masonite with artists' colors, just student-grade things. Then I started research about painting. We had art books and magazines in the college library, so I discovered various things about contemporary art. Coming from the state of Idaho to San Francisco and walking into the Museum, green as a cucumber, and seeing Clyfford Still for the first time, and Francis and Diebenkorn and all hanging there, was quite a shock. Here I'd been painting views of Coeur d'Alene Lake with the mountains!

I thought, "I wonder what these people are doing." I didn't condemn them at all -- I thought, "if they're in a museum there must be something to it. I don't know what but I'm going to look, since I'm a greenhorn just arrived here on the bus from the state of Idaho." So I did that and went to the school where they taught and snooped around, I wasn't enrolled there, asked questions and I found out.

ROBERT BROWN: This is all before you got your applied art degree?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh yes, it was during that time. I was doing both. There was a philosophy from the 30s still prevalent out there that "if you're in art you're an artist." For instance, any artists in the 30s supported themselves doing commercial art while they made their sculpture, while they made their paintings. We had some professors from Europe, namely Wolfgang Lederer, who was my professor in applied design, from Vienna, and he worked mostly for the California wine industry but he was very angry with me when I graduated and said, "I'm through with this, I'm going to study painting." He wanted me to go on in that.

ROBERT BROWN: What was his argument?

ROBERT NEUMAN: He'd given me straight A's for four years. I had done book jackets and Sunkist oranges and poster ads for the magazines by the highway and every other way, topography and everything. He didn't want me to "waste" what he'd taught me, that was his idea. He was Germanic and a very nice person. I was going to drop out in junior year but then I thought I'd have to go a final year to get the degree, it's ridiculous to stop. So I went on with it.

ROBERT BROWN: You found it could be rather tedious and very limited in purpose, commercial art: is that right?

ROBERT NEUMAN: I wanted to express myself, not be so utilitarian. I enjoyed it if somebody asked me to do a halftone illustration of a moving picture camera or something like that, use halftone screens to do it or one thing or another, I could do that but it was mostly just a facile trip. It involved a facility and I had seemed to be able to handle that without any problem. But I wasn't getting enough personal reward from it.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you and fellow students discuss these things quite a lot?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes we did, we talked about this all the time. It seemed that while I was working on a Bachelor's degree in applied design, I was hanging out with all the painters and sculptors and not with the commercial artists. So I was happy to graduate. Then I switched over, and when I graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts, my father came to the graduation. Since he'd never graduated from college, he didn't know that there wasn't a Ph.D. He said, "Now I think you should go on and get the next degree." I said, "Well, there is no next degree, that's as far as you can go." But he was quite pleased that I got a graduate degree. Then he went home and left me there: I'd better



look around and find some way to make a living! (both laugh heartily)

ROBERT BROWN: A practical man, wasn't he.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You'd gotten married by this time, too? While you were still an undergraduate?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, after I left the University of Idaho, before I came to California. She was in literature. She has a Ph.D. now in literature now I guess; we're divorced. At that time she was working on her Master's at Mills College. Her name was Priscilla Federsen [phon.sp.] She was very involved in literature --

ROBERT BROWN: Mills had a pretty high-powered intellectual there, didn't they?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, Mills College was very near our apartment and in music, literature and art did a lot. In summer they had guest people. One summer they had Fernand Leger as a teacher, one summer they had Kuniyoshi, the next summer when they had Max Beckmann, I enrolled. I went there along with Nathan Oliveira, a well-known California painter, and a number of others, there were about 12 of us. That was a very interesting summer. Although Beckmann couldn't speak English and his wife more or less translated, just the aura of having him standing and looking at your painting was very interesting. He made his feelings felt some way, just by looking at him you could get the idea of what he felt.

I had a great deal of admiration for him and I thought I was painting some things that were in his arena, but he didn't see it that way. I don't know what he saw it as, it was miles from his way of thinking from his point of view, and I thought I was running right down the track there.

ROBERT BROWN: (laughing) You judged this from remarks he made?

ROBERT NEUMAN: He looked at a certain painting of mine where I'd painted a human figure with a head like a bird of paradise and that had armor on it, it looked like one of those fantastic figures in his paintings. He didn't see it at all, because the space was so different -- he has medieval space in his paintings and I didn't have that, I didn't know enough at that time to do that.

But there was another boy next to me who loved Matisse, he was leaning toward Matisse, and Beckmann never said anything about his work. So one day the boy says, "This time when he comes I'm going to step in front of him so he can't get by and I'm going to ask him to say something." Beckmann's wife told him the boy wanted to say something, so Beckmann turned to him and said, "Picasso and Matisse are not the end of the world for me" and walked off. (he laughs) That was a real shocker!

ROBERT BROWN: He was enigmatic, wasn't he, very difficult to draw out --

ROBERT NEUMAN: He was a very independent man, incredibly independent. A very nice person.

ROBERT BROWN: You were painting steadily. What kinds of things were you doing? You'd had a prize the year before. In 1950 you had exhibitions at the San Francisco Museum and at the Oakland Museum.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, a typical portrait would be a kid come from the hills of Idaho who knew zero about art but had tremendous thirst for it, and then when I got to San Francisco suddenly here

was the Ecole de Pacifique, San Francisco style, in full bloom right there, as soon as you stepped off the bus. And then you turn around and you're standing next to Max Beckmann, and this tremendous intellectual discourse amongst young artists all over the San Francisco and Los Angeles and areas up and down. So the place was boiling and I really found that extremely stimulating. Consequently, my own work got involved with European schools, School of the Pacific, all influences because I knew so little when I came there.

Then I got to the point where I understood the School of the Pacific and I liked that the best, mainly because they thought the New York artists were a bunch of money-grabbers and the artists of the West Coast had a running debate with the Eastern artists -- they said, "You're all School of Paris disciples, et cetera et cetera, and on the West Coast we're independent, we don't have any money, we don't have any big galleries, we don't have nothing. And here's Clyfford Still painting, there's Francis, there's Tobey, Morris Graves and many people there."

ROBERT BROWN: Looking back, would you say some of those older artists were self-satisfied therefore? Or perhaps insecure?

ROBERT NEUMAN: They felt that they didn't receive the recognition they were due because the New York establishment locked it all up there, for monetary reasons primarily; that the New York school was "in" and if you weren't in with it you weren't going to get in. So many fine artists -- Diebenkorn was painting out there for years and nobody would pay any attention to him because he wasn't living in Manhattan or something of that sort.

As a matter of fact, he went to New York once, with his wife, drove with his car and some paintings in the back seat, from the University of Illinois; it was one of his first trips to New York. And he parked his car near Greenwich Village or some place there and went to see about showing his paintings, and somebody broke into his car and stole his paintings. He told his wife to get back in the car, "we're going back to Illinois," and he drove off, didn't bother to stay.

There was a certain suspicion and dislike between the West Coast artists and East Coast, because we had so little as an official art hierarchy there, as opposed to New York artists. Every time they made a smear on the paper there were six dealers there. We could be there for six years and nobody would come. Some of the very good people were that way, and they were just basically independent. People like Mark Tobey, he didn't always live in Seattle, he went there from New York or Chicago or wherever he was, and he led a very quiet, monastic life, except for his trips to the Orient.

So the West Coast artists had this kind of "we're-out-here-by-ourselves" thing away from the hierarchy of art in New York, officialdom. "We're proud of that but at the same time it's a detriment because you can't earn a living." And it was difficult. There were many good artists there. James Fred Dixon, whom I studied with, no longer living. He was the equal if not better than many New York City artists who were --

ROBERT BROWN: He taught printmaking, right?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, but he was -- he may have had a little too much alcohol once in a while but he was an interesting artist. But there were many others. Edith Smith, a fine woman artist, the last I knew she was living in Chicago, her husband is a musical composer.

ROBERT BROWN: Hassel Smith?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, Hassel Smith was exhibiting all over, a very interesting person. He was hard for me to get to know but I tried. The School of Fine arts in San Francisco had all these people in it -- David Park, Hassel Smith, Still, Diebenkorn, Sam Francis -- they were all either professors or students there. They became sometime later on a rather tight knot amongst themselves, it was very hard for other people --well, Jim Weeks was there sometimes -to enter into their circle. But I got to know David Park pretty well, and James Fred Dixon was a good friend.

ROBERT BROWN: What was Park like? Can you characterize what he was like at that time?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. David Park was, well, he was a painter, all he was concerned with was painting, but he was an expatriate from Boston, he'd moved to the West. He loved jazz, that was one of his main interests other than painting. He lived around Berkeley for quite a while, I think, but he also must have lived in San Francisco and he was a professor at the School of Fine Arts on 800 Chestnut Street. He was a very likable person, and very surprising. He gave me the first prize for Pacific Coast Painting for a particular painting I made entitled "Terrible War Machine." He didn't "have" to do that because there were many others whom he knew better and whose work he knew better than mine; I was still kind of a newcomer on the scene. But I did win prizes at the San Francisco Museum for watercolor and oil and the Oakland Museum and many places.

ROBERT BROWN: You were a good friend at that time of Nathan Oliveira, too, weren't you?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, we were classmates, I think he was maybe a year behind me or so. We've remained friends to this day. We still write letters and communicate by phone. My wife visited him when she was out there and we've had a good friendship. If we don't see each other for a long time, when we do communicate it's as though we'd seen each other just yesterday. It's really very close, it's good.

ROBERT BROWN: With him did you mainly talk art or did you have other interested you pursued together?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, we talked art mostly but he was interested in jazz too. In art school he had a little jazz band, he played the cornet I think it was. Peter Voulkos was also a classmate of mine. I took ceramics and once he was sitting there making this huge tub, I remember. But he's from Montana, which is near Idaho --

ROBERT BROWN: His background not too much unlike yours, wasn't it.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. He came from Bozeman, Montana, which is way out there. But he'd made ceramics before he came to art school. There's the Archie Bray [phon. sp.] Foundation in Bozeman. Bray was a man who had a brick yard and kilns there. He set it up for people to make ceramics somehow, that's where Voulkos came from. I once traded a painting or two for ceramics with Peter Voulkos. And I traded prints with Nathan Oliveira too.

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ROBERT BROWN: What was Voulkos like at that time?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Peter Voulkos was, and still is, a hulk of a man. Most of the artists in the West are very independent. It's a peculiar thing, because compared to Eastern artists, we don't have a history of making art that you find on the East coast. So when artists are independent they sort of make their own history, and Voulkos was like a rocket -- someone lit the fuse and he was gone. He

relates to Japanese art, Japanese ceramics, Chinese ceramics, all sorts of things, there's nothing he won't do. He even went into metal sculpture for a while. He's a wonderfully creative person. His main concern, it seems to me, is breaching the bridge where people tried to set ceramics or clay work into a little niche as "craft," and he's spent his whole lifetime tearing that down.

Oliveira and I met sometime in the lithography class. He's probably one of the best lithographers in the United States, although he's known for his painting. My own personal view is that he's a better lithographer than painter. We both took the lithography course and he got more involved in it than I did. That's what he did for many years, he didn't do so much painting. I got involved in it because I liked it as an avenue of expression but he was involved in the whole thing -- the technical, the equipment and everything else. Well, I did to some extent. I bought the press, which I knocked down and kept in my apartment, hoping some day to put it some place where I could use it; then I got a Fulbright and had to go to Germany, so I had to sell it and leave it in California.

ROBERT BROWN: But you were never so interested in the technical side as he was.

ROBERT NEUMAN: No, he knows all the tricks and secrets, and I have to ask people that. I have a different reason when I make lithographs than he does, about the medium itself, but I believe he's the best lithographer in the United States PERIOD today and I wish he would do more of it. He's done hundreds and hundreds, but he's gone into monoprints now and he's oil painting, but I miss his lithographs, they're really very good. But he can make a far better living painting than he came with lithography, so that's probably why he does it.

ROBERT BROWN: You said you got to know David Park pretty well. What about the man you said you called "the big boss" at the time in San Francisco, Clyfford Still?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. He was almost a god, and it was utterly astounding to me when I found out where he came from. I don't know where he came from originally but he was teaching at Washington State College in Pullman, Washington, which is 12 miles or so down the railroad track from the University of Idaho. That's a very remote place, and he went from there to San Francisco and became almost like a god to artists after a few years there because he demanded in art a very strong spiritual attitude in the paintings.

He didn't care much for New York artists, who he felt related to the School of Paris and who weren't sufficiently independent in their work. He disliked brushes, it was he, I think, who talked about "the tyranny of the brush." You notice most of his paintings are made with the palette knife. He became head or something close to the head of the School of Fine Arts in San Francisco and then on the faculty with him were David Park and Hassel Smith and James Budd Dixon and a few others. But he was definitely the kingpin or the focal point and there were many, many people whom you could call camp followers or terribly overly influenced by his work. I was still a neophyte or pretty young when he was there but I exhibited with him in the San Francisco Museum and with Diebenkorn and those people.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you ever get to know Still or did you have any --

ROBERT NEUMAN: No, I never did. He wasn't very public. His wife worked at the School in the office there but he wasn't very public. He would make trips to New York because he had a friendship with Rothko. I think it was at that time, I'm not sure, that Frank Lloyd Wright came to the School to give a lecture or something too. It was a vital school -- it was so "vital" the FBI investigated it because the faculty and students were sunbathing in the nude on top of the roof of the Art School. Of course in San Francisco there's a lot of sunshine and warmth. The FBI was worried about the discussions in

the School, they thought they were politically explosive and everything else.

It was a very fine painting school. I didn't attend it, I attended the California College of Arts and Crafts. I did then, in my graduate period, take a course in lithography there with James Budd Dixon and Hassel Smith, but after there was an explosion at the school politically --

ROBERT BROWN: About this time?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, it was after I finished my graduate degree, and most of those people left, the whole faculty left and they got a new director, Ernest Mundt who was out of the Bauhaus in Germany.

ROBERT BROWN: Why had there been an explosion?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, it was a painting and sculpture school then, when Still was there, and it got very elite, which didn't bother me in the least but it evidently bothered the school's financial coffers. The GI Bill was running out, or something, so they were having problems of this kind, and there were people who philosophically wanted the school to be broader -- to have more furniture design, more architecture, glassblowing, all kinds of things. Plus the basic philosophy they wanted broader. They didn't object to what was there, they wanted it broader. Douglas MacAgy was director when Still was there, he went on to Texas to be director of the museum there, I think, but he encouraged elitism. I didn't think it was bad at all, I mean, it's hard enough to get good art without having to find some place where it'll grow. It seemed to me like a good idea, but they wanted a more broad kind of school --

ROBERT BROWN: More points of view?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, and more departments -- photography and all kinds of things, and these people didn't encourage that. I don't blame them, because they had a terrific thing going there but it got to the point where even the FBI investigated the school. So they all had to leave, and Mundt became the new director. I won a first prize or something in the San Francisco museum with a painting called "Apple Town Revisited," a painting on Masonite made -- see, I didn't know a lot of artists were familiar with housepaints and such. David Park used white lead and house painters white lead and Picasso painted with enamels and Pollock also. I used various kinds of paint, I was experimenting too.

I used asphaltum in the painting and found it hard for it to dry, because asphaltum doesn't want to dry. So I won this prize and went to the opening and found the paint was running over onto the frame and about to drop on the floor. But Mundt was there, saw the painting, and said, "Why don't you come teach at the school?" So I went there then, to the School of Fine Arts at San Francisco.

ROBERT BROWN: In 1952. Mundt was for the Bauhaus background, he was trained or he had the outlook to have all sorts of media.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, he was a sculptor, made sculpture out of copper tubing, bent it and so on. It was very nice but it was more European-way. But there was a lot of bad feelings after they had to clean out the faculty and start over.

ROBERT BROWN: They actually just fired --

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, they let them go one way or another. I think Clyfford Still moved to New York at that time and did well at the Museum of Modern Art. But they did let a lot of people go and

there were hard feelings because some of the same students were there. When I came there it was hard to teach right because they were still having this political fracas, which I had nothing whatsoever to do with.

ROBERT BROWN: What do you mean? In terms of national or politics or -- ?

ROBERT NEUMAN: No, it was a political fracas within the School's philosophy. Many of the students, possibly a third of them, wanted the School to stay like it was and they were still there, so there was this kind of bad feeling floating around the School that made it difficult to teach there. I had a different way of teaching from the people who were there before. So I stayed there for whatever it was, a year, year and a half --

ROBERT BROWN: Can you describe it -- what was your approach to teaching?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, being individualistic myself in my paintings and never having studied undergraduate oil painting but sort of picked it up along the way until I got into graduate school, and I was interested in how I could get into graduate school because I never had any undergraduate painting, but at the undergraduate school they judged you by your work rather than on how many courses you'd had in undergraduate painting.

Consequently, when I started teaching at the School, I taught in a similar way -- I tried to respect the artist's individuality. They had more or less a "party line" when Still was there -- you went his way. Which was an interesting way but it's not the only way.

ROBERT BROWN: What was his way when he was teaching students?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, it was a completely abstract way, based very much on intuition, instinct, to try to reach a certain spiritual attitude in painting. [after some hesitation] It's hard to explain something visual in words but there were these huge monolithic forms -- huge monolithic forms -- and very little drawing. This was very different from the way I would teach, because I had drawn all my life, and while I try not to be, I often become a linear painter. On the other hand, I have a strong imagination because of all those years as a young boy by myself imagining things to draw. And I respect imagination. Imagination was considered somewhat frivolous by these people in the School before I came.

But I respect it very much. Respecting imagination and encouraging that, and encouraging drawing, and talking about the possibilities that exist vis-a-vis other philosophies of art, such as you might find in Europe or New York or wherever, wasn't so well received by so many of the people there but it was by others.

ROBERT BROWN: They were used to, in effect, a much more structured program, weren't they.

ROBERT NEUMAN: You could call it structured, I suppose, but it was sometimes called "party line."

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, party line in that sense of structure.

ROBERT NEUMAN: I liked their paintings very much and I still do but I think that there are people who have other ways of expressing themselves.

ROBERT BROWN: You said to me earlier there was a good deal of conformity and clubbiness, or there had been among --.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, there was a clique, like, they were almost a closely knitted group in that it was very hard to enter into that. They knew they had something very important and they didn't want to dissipate, although they were friendly enough and everything. I do know that many, many students who followed that way never went anywhere with their work, because after a while it became too much of an art philosophy party line. The originators had it but some of the ones that came after -- you couldn't just hang it on somebody like a shirt, art has to be intimately felt by the person that makes it, you can't wear it like a shirt. And therein was the problem for that sort of thing.

ROBERT BROWN: And you in that year you were there at least tried to pull some of the students out and how to begin looking at various .

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, and it was kind of an unruly time because they changed the whole faculty. That means the English professors, history professors, photography, sculpture -- everybody; a new head of the School and everything else. And that school was very famous then over the whole country. Most people on the East coast couldn't figure it out, that something had popped up in San Francisco that was so important artistically that even the FBI was out there! So that was a very unusual thing and it affected the whole West coast.

ROBERT BROWN: They took themselves seriously or they felt it was very important --

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh yes, very seriously. It was really a very stimulating environment to be in as a young artist and I'm glad I went there rather than some other place, you know. As a matter of fact, Diebenkorn -- it's in his book -- when he left there, there was this fight going on and then Still got dogmatic, he didn't think anybody could do figurative art. Well, about that time Diebenkorn was a tremendous abstract artist. Somebody decided to incorporate the figurative element in his painting because David Park had been talking to him and they had a big fight within themselves.

So, when the School collapsed, Diebenkorn decided to go and get a Master's degree at the University of New Mexico. He'd been in the Marine Corps and didn't have certain academic preparations for graduate school or something of that nature, as best I recall. But he was so good they said, well, there's a building over there -- rather than have him report to a studio with all the other graduate students when he was already aeons ahead of them, they put him in a separate building by himself and let him work. Which is not uncommon, but they did that, and that's how he got his Master's degree. (Brown laughs)

ROBERT BROWN: Did you get to know him when he was still in San Francisco?

ROBERT NEUMAN: I never met him, no. I'd seen him around the Museum but never met him. I'm not a very forward person unless there's some particular I want to know. When I was in Barcelona, Spain I was offered a chance to go see Miro and I didn't go. I probably could have gone to see Picasso too, some friends of mine did. Unless there's some particular I'm interested in I usually don't do that.

ROBERT BROWN: You, then, were on the faculty there. You also taught then at the California School of Arts and Crafts -- you held down two jobs.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, I taught at both places. At Arts and Crafts I taught life drawing and watercolor. I didn't teach any oil painting there.

ROBERT BROWN: The California School had a broader curriculum than the San Francisco Fine Arts --

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh yes, it was what you call a traditional art school. They were trying to make the San Francisco School a painting and sculpture school. I thought that was terrific but it was something that couldn't continue to exist because of economics --the GI Bill was winding down, and so forth.

ROBERT BROWN: How did all this teaching affect your work? You must have been extremely busy, plus you had a family.

ROBERT NEUMAN: There were my wife and myself, we didn't have any children then. I painted all the time, night, daytime, I often had classes at night or late afternoon. So I spent my life painting seven days a week --

ROBERT BROWN: Morning, noon and night, but you were also able to do some painting and I guess a printmaking class as well.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh yes. I trained myself. From those early days till now I worked seven days a week, and if I'd teach in the daytime then I'd paint at night, and vice versa. Some of painting of course is conceptualizing about what you're going to do, or just studying the painting; it's not always a matter of hands-on work. So I got used to working on my painting at night for a time there. I still tend to be a night owl and I think it stems from that. I managed to get quite a bit done, however. I just worked all the time. Even now I work seven days, on Sundays now; my studio is near here. It didn't interfere that much. One has to expect to earn a living somehow.

ROBERT BROWN: About that time you also, I guess, served on some exhibition juries for the San Francisco Art Association. What did that amount to?

ROBERT NEUMAN: The San Francisco Art Association had a very nice program in the San Francisco Museum of Art when Grace McCann Morley was the director of the Museum. She was a very fine director, exceptional, and she gave the Museum two or three times a year to the San Francisco Art Association for shows. One was for oil paintings, one was for sculpture and drawings, another one for printmaking, I believe, or watercolors; two or three years a year, and then the artists voted by postcard whom they wanted on the jury.

Considering that I wasn't very well-known, that San Franciscans only knew me through my paintings pretty much, I was elected to do that a few times and it was quite an honor. They don't do that very much any more, now it's young curators tend to do the choosing. Today we have not such a good idea about these things, because the curators are often very young, don't have much experience, are very friendly with art dealers, tend to be influenced by what they put in their exhibitions. It's not the best thing.

ROBERT BROWN: Were the San Francisco Art Associations shows pretty interesting?

ROBERT NEUMAN: [emphatically] Very interesting.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it open-ended -- anybody could --

ROBERT NEUMAN: It was open to anybody in the United States but essentially, because of transportation costs and so on, 95% of the work would be from the West Coast -- Los Angeles, Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, Denver. They would box them up and bring or ship them over. They were very interesting shows and I think of them -- personally I find some of those shows even today more interesting than the shows you might see around here in Boston, which are too commercially oriented to whatever is commercially viable in New York City.



We didn't have that situation out there because there were very few collectors on the West Coast and there was reliance instead on the quality of the work to make the shows interesting; and the criteria, too. There were tremendous debates on who got in and who got out of the exhibitions but over-all they were pretty representative because the artists were judged by their peers pretty much. The Art Association was an avant forward-looking organization to begin with, so the peers that were elected as jurors were pretty good. David Park would often be on the jury, Hassel Smith. Sometimes they'd elect somebody in Los Angeles who'd come up for the day. The shows were very stimulating, very interesting.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you find that jurying was a pleasurable duty? Or was it difficult to exclude people or --

ROBERT NEUMAN: No, I don't have any problem on that because I have certain feelings about what I see, so for me it's easy. But you have different processes --some of them are secret, where you have buttons on a little piece of wood that are electronically connected to some light in another room and the person records through the light, so nobody knows how anybody votes. Then generally when it comes to the prizes in museums, which they don't give much any more but did then, the shows were competitive, judged by their peers, then everything was discussed and a vote of two out of three, or three out of five jurors would be enough to get the prizes.

I didn't have any trouble at all judging things. I have a clear feeling about what I see. I believe there has to be some kind of interior driving force in the artist that should be in the painting. I'm not worried about styles, I don't care much about styles. I'm concerned with the individual works. As somebody once said, "If it's good, it's good." That's more or less the way I look at it. That's not a very popular point of view but that's the way I look at it.

I was once invited to jury the State Fair in Tampa, Florida. I flew down and judged it and I gave some prizes to people who were pseudo-primitive for certain kinds of constructions they made, and when the jurying process was over with and they were hanging the show, I had a plane reservation to return very quickly to Boston and one official said, "It's probably a good idea you're leaving town early!" Because nobody had chosen such people before for the exhibition but they're obligated to hang them because I chose them.

ROBERT BROWN: Your earlier teaching, did you find they were a drain, did they help you think out things?

ROBERT NEUMAN: When I first started teaching I found it very interesting because I like people and especially people who are interested in art. As a young teacher beginning, you're always inquisitive about what kind of results you'll get, the class, and so on; that was all quite interesting to me. But when I graduated and needed a job I was working in my father's hardware store and went to a hardware company in Oakland, California, and said I'd like a responsible job in a hardware store there, a big state-wide store. "Maybe you have something in a warehouse at night I could do?" Then I could paint in the daytime. They looked at my resume and said, "Well, you have two degrees so we don't want to hire you, you won't stay here on the job stacking up wheelbarrows" and things like that. So I went back to my college and they said, "Well, we could use a new teacher here in the California College of Arts and Crafts in drawing the human figure." I had to go show my drawings to the president of the College. Which I did. He was from Australia. He said, "Well, your drawings are pretty good but you don't know how to draw hands and feet. You can teach a night class in life drawing." So I started out there.

I wondered about this president from Australia: where did he get his training? He told me: "When I

was a young man, I was in Paris and they had exhibitions along the banks of the Seine in tents like circus tents, and anybody could bring their paintings and show them there. I came to one tent and there was this painting people were laughing at. The guy's name was Picasso. I thought they were ridiculous," he said, "because I was following Bouguereau. Now that I look back on it 40 years later, perhaps I should not have followed Bouguereau!" (both laugh heartily)  
This was the man who told me I didn't know how to draw hands and feet, and ever since then I've been studying and feet.

ROBERT BROWN: (still laughing) But as you look back, you found that teaching was a help.

ROBERT NEUMAN: I liked it, and as time went on I liked it more so if there were good students and in a good school where they wanted you to teach. There are some schools where the quality of students leaves something to be desired, also the school looks down on the art department as some unnecessary evil, so to speak.

ROBERT BROWN: But that certainly wasn't true of those two art schools.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh, no, no, it was a basic thing there.

ROBERT BROWN: As you were about to leave the West coast, in summary these San Francisco painters whom you've discussed, you said at one place that some of the elements that you absorbed in those days are with you still. You mentioned broad surface treatment, calligraphic drawing, energized expressiveness, and even some Oriental influences.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, and also a kind of a tendency toward holistic surface and space in the paintings. That was a distinct difference between the East and West coasts. The East coast was still lined up with cubism and Picasso-esque kind of mannerisms which was the antithesis of what they were involved in around San Francisco. Los Angeles was a little different. It was strongly influenced by the movie industry and there was a lot of surrealism there. There was an ongoing aesthetic war between Los Angeles and San Francisco, because in San Francisco you starved to death and we thought we had the best -- and I'm sure we had the best -- [Brown laughs] paintings, but in Los Angeles there was money, so the artists down there actually sold works. Some of them made a reasonable living that way. That was never the case in San Francisco. The collectors would go to New York or Paris and buy paintings and bring them back to San Francisco, even when you could buy Clyfford Stills and Diebenkorns for a few hundred dollars.

ROBERT BROWN: But Los Angeles was looking much more over its shoulder to the East coast.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes but it was strongly influenced by the Hollywood scene too -- the fantasies of the movies and all that kind of thing. We called it artificial, but anyway they were very different from the San Francisco artists. I showed in Los Angeles twice at the Landau Gallery on L a Boulevard. One was a one-man show, another I put together myself of four or five of us. No one responded to any of the work. The dealer was very nice to make the show.

ROBERT BROWN: Because that was a rather well-established gallery.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh yes, it was, it was. I didn't realize, for me it was just a gallery to make an exhibition because I was pretty young, but I gathered everybody's work together, put it in a U-Haul trailer and drove to Los Angeles. Then they hung it. They had James Budd Dixon and Edith Smith, D-- Jo [phon.sps.] who was a Chinese painter, and myself; there may have been another person too, I'm not sure.

ROBERT BROWN: But there wasn't much reception of it, or sales, anything like that?

ROBERT NEUMAN: No. You see, most of my life has been that I've always been some place, like in the early stages; like the school in San Francisco was pretty well in bloom when I came there and finished by the time I left. But Los Angeles hadn't exploded yet as an art center. Later, when I went to Europe on a Fulbright and Guggenheim, I went to Spain and was one of the first American artists to show there after the WWII. I wasn't the first but there were only two or three of us, I think; Larry Calcagno was one.

The same in Washington, DC. I made one of the best shows I've ever had down there and Washington, DC hadn't woken up yet either. Now they have a regular renaissance in Washington. I was always ahead of all this just a little bit. I made a show up in Vermont at Bundy Museum, a private museum up in Sugarbush -- Waitsfield, Vermont, actually -- which doesn't exist any more. That was before things got exciting up there too. Bundy told me that of all the shows he's had at the museum, this was the hardest show of all for him to take down because he liked it so much in his museum, that it was a nice group of works and they grew on him as they were there.

So I was very flattered by that. But almost all these shows were -- in Germany in 1954 we showed at Amerika Haus there, people had never even seen American paintings. So I was always ahead of appreciators, and the ones who came 10 years later were very well received usually.

ROBERT BROWN: So your career didn't leap ahead because you were a little ahead of your time.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. It didn't help any except to go broke in the process.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, how come that in 1953 you looked into the Fulbright program? Was it something you'd just heard about, or -- ?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, I was very naive, because coming from the hills of Idaho I thought "I'll study art and make paintings and everything else will take care of itself." Then somebody said, "Why don't you subtract your expenses from your income tax? You pay taxes on your paintings when you sell them." I didn't even know you could do that, so I started doing that. Then Leon Golden, a New York artist now, a very fine lithographer, told me, "I'm applying for a Fulbright to Paris." I didn't know what that was, and he told me.

So I applied for two years or three years to Italy and didn't get it, but they wrote me that Germany had opened up late, past the deadlines, so there were no applications for Germany and they were sending out letters to people who were alternatives in other programs. They invited me to apply for Germany, so I did, switching from Italy, and they gave me a grant. That was really a wonderful moment for me, it opened up my eyes, because I hadn't been in Europe before. Of course it was right after the War, and Stuttgart where I lived was half-bombed and burned out.

Essentially they just gave you a check each month and said "you're on your own." We did attend classes about the laws and customs of the country, and in language a little bit. There had never been a Fulbright program before, so there was no pattern.

ROBERT BROWN: Had you any notion of what kind of art was being done in Germany before you got there?

ROBERT NEUMAN: No, but I enjoyed the paintings of Fritz Winter very much. They asked whom you'd like to study with and I asked for him.

ROBERT BROWN: You'd seen his paintings?

ROBERT NEUMAN: I was very familiar with them. He came out of the Bauhaus, a very abstract German artist. Then I ended up in Stuttgart studying with Willi Baumeister, nowhere near Fritz Winter. Someone told me where he lived but it was at some distance and I never got there.

Baumeister had been a great pre-war artist but the Nazis had forbidden him to paint. They'd come around and look at his brushes to see if he'd used them and all sorts of things like that. So he made underground black-market silk screens in another building where the Nazis couldn't check. For the young artist in Germany, he was the godfather, so to speak, because he was one of the few abstract artists who came out of the smoke after World War II. He's considered very important in Germany today too.

INTERVIEW CONTINUED, MAY 8, 1991.

ROBERT BROWN: We were talking about your time as a Fulbright student in Germany. You talked a bit about the German master, Willi Baumeister. You also mentioned you admired the paintings of Fritz Winter. Can you say a bit more about him and what his work was like at that time, how it influenced you.

ROBERT NEUMAN: As young American artist residing on the Pacific Coast, who had never lived in Europe or New York City, I was interested in what was called "international art" at the time, "international style." I was quite interested in that, so I'd investigated whatever sources I could and I found paintings by a man named Fritz Winter and liked them a lot. I later found out he'd been a student at the Bauhaus.

In 1953 when I received my Fulbright grant to Germany, he'd returned there, having been a prisoner of war in a Russian prison camp for I believe four years. He'd paint with a stick in the dirt in the prison yard, then wipe it out and make another painting. His work is very abstract but in a philosophic and design way it relates to elements of the world, it's not just abstract theory.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean there were some recognizable references --

ROBERT NEUMAN: No, nothing recognizable, it's totally abstract but it's such that you feel that some things are the earth, or rock, or tree, or you sense that there's nature in his paintings when you see them, yet there are no recognizable images there. To me that was very interesting at the time; still is, I like his paintings a good deal. I asked to study with him and since it was the Fulbright program's first year in Germany, and we were the first people to go there after the War, there wasn't a lot of organization in place as yet and I ended up being sent to Stuttgart to the Akademie der Bilden und Kunst, on Beissenhoff [phon.sp.] on a hill above Stuttgart.

The head professor of painting there was Willi Baumeister. He'd been an abstract artist before the War, forbidden to paint by the Nazis, so he switched to silk screen so he could secretly produce prints outside his studio that the police couldn't find. I never got to see Fritz Winter. I learned where he lived but didn't go there, I hesitate to go where I'm not invited. I was invited, actually, to visit Miro, but I still didn't go; in retrospect I wish I had.

END OF THIS SIDE, B of TAPE 1  
BEGINNING SIDE A, TAPE 2

ROBERT BROWN: (beginning mid-sentence) back then with Baumeister?

ROBERT NEUMAN: I had him as my professor. Initially, when we went to art school, I met another American artist whom I'd never met before, from Boston, named Thomas Geekus, (phon.sp.) another painter who does very fine work and still lives here in Boston. He and I were the only Fulbright artists in Stuttgart, the rest being in other German cities.

Everything was in disrepair, there were shortages et cetera, it was very crowded, no place to work. So Mr. Geekus went to the U.S. Consul and arranged for us to get a room apiece -- heated, quite adequate -- in their warehouse. We didn't have a Marine guard with a rifle standing outside the door when we came to paint. The War had ended a few years earlier but the country was still occupied by the four Powers, so there were still guards.

We painted away from the School, then. We forgot about it, we'd go there occasionally, then we heard Baumeister was wondering where we were. But we seemed to be more advanced than the German students because they'd been busy trying to survive, the War had taken a toll on them. Many students told us that Willi Baumeister was almost single-handedly responsible for encouraging young Germans to start painting again because of the tremendous discouragement as aftermath of the War. So his courses were well-attended, very crowded.

Eventually the Fulbright Commission in Bonn formed an exhibition of all the American artists in Germany. It circulated to Paris and Belgium, I don't know all the places, and several cities in Germany, usually to the Amerika Haus, as it was in Stuttgart. In order to form the exhibition they had to locate us all. Baumeister received a letter from the High Commissioner wanting to know where the student Geekus and Neuman were, they hadn't heard from us in months. Neither had Baumeister! So he invited us to lunch with him at his home, then asked what we were doing and where we worked.

So he came to our studios and looked at our paintings. He could see we were of a little different cut. American contemporary art was so far ahead of anything in Germany at the time: he could see that too but didn't want to say it. He made a few sketches to try to help us with our painting --

ROBERT BROWN: That was about the only constructive contact you had with him?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. We would go to the critiques at the Kunst Akademie where we were supposed to be working, which were always in German, you see, and our German wasn't that good. The students taking part also spoke in German. Some friends would translate a bit but not very well, so we just went on our own. We felt we understood what they were doing anyway. There was a Japanese-American student studying there who'd won a prize -- he wasn't on a Fulbright -- from Hans Hofmann. So we talked and spent a lot of time with him. He travelled a lot and was in jail a few times too.

ROBERT BROWN: What were the attitudes of the German students towards you?

ROBERT NEUMAN: They were very pleased and happy to see us. We'd have lunch with them in the Kunst Akademie, which was usually spaetzle and beer. We had many friends there. I remember inviting one or two to my studio one day. I had a big red painting, about six feet on the vertical, almost solid with red pigment. I asked the students what they thought of the painting and they said, "Ach, Herr Neuman, sie sind sehr reich!" Because red is the most expensive color, and most Germans would paint with brown because they had no money, the War had wrecked the place, and they didn't know how they could even continue to exist in the art school. To see someone actually painting with red pigment was almost beyond belief for them. They liked the painting but they were astounded at the amount of red paint, never having seen anybody do that before.

ROBERT BROWN: You mentioned the Weissenhoff, the famous advanced architectural school, wasn't it?

ROBERT NEUMAN: I never investigated all the parts of the school -- I probably should have -- but you could see there was, as I recall, part of the school was a very fine piece of architecture. There had been something going on there at one time, which is what you refer to, probably. (Brown confirms) I did see part of the student exhibition at one point, some fantastic ceramics from the art education department, which was far beyond what they do in many American ceramic departments. I was astounded.

I didn't investigate the school very much because I'd never been in Europe before, and for somebody who'd come from the foothills of the Rockies to suddenly find himself in the middle of Europe and as long as he's frugal can go any place he wants to, do anything he wants to, was a real eye-opener for me. I was busy absorbing the European culture as fast as I could. So I didn't spent much time checking out the architecture and so forth.

I did check out the Germanic attitude in architecture. Part of that was encouraged by the fact that many Stuttgart buildings had the facade and nothing else -- there was no roof, back, or anything. During the War the British had made one last run over Stuttgart. Churches were bombed; the concert hall of the Stuttgart Symphony, a very famous musical organization, was just a huge facade, but one wing or separate building there had been repaired and I went to it a few times to hear the Stuttgart Little Symphony play.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, you had been living in a city near San Francisco for several years. Did you by now consider that living in the city was preferable to, say, staying in the rather remote area where you'd grown up?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, I felt at that time -- I don't feel that way any more -- most of the art organizations, art activities, the museums, the critics, scholars, and other artists are located in the cities. It's where the press is, where they make the books, films, all that sort of thing. So I was attracted to the cities. But now I no longer have that feeling many years later, because I'm sufficiently interested in my own work that I really don't need that. I can get as much as I want from cities by making an occasional trip to a major city somewhere or going to the big museums once a year. I don't have that interest any more. I'm interested in my own work now and I could live in the country now without much trouble. I do spend a lot of time in the state of Maine now.

ROBERT BROWN: During that year in Stuttgart, you did what you called your "black paintings." Could you sort of describe them generally?

ROBERT NEUMAN: The "black paintings" began (stopping to reflect) in Stuttgart, I guess, or in that time, I guess, around 1953. I was using industrial paints and common house paints, as many artists were, because they were liquid with milk in a can instead of paste.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean for convenience? Cheaper?

ROBERT NEUMAN: No, you could spread it, and being liquid you could do various technical things with it, but the chemical quality of the pigment itself was bad. You can name the artists who used that -- Franz Kline, Pollock, whoever -- and they paid a price for that. Even Picasso used some liquid paint. Because it's very much like dipping a brush in a bottle of ink, it's liquid, you don't have to dissolve the ink first from a stick of ink.

The paintings began there, and then continued when I returned to the U.S., to New Paltz, New York, to work at the State University of New York. My interest with the black paintings was that the world had just gone through this tremendous war, World War II, and there was a shock throughout the world from this war of the destruction and terrible things that man had done to himself. That was felt in the cultural community in a large, general way. That's one reason that you saw many black paintings -- there weren't only mine. You wondered what was going to happen next after the second War. Many creative people were very depressed.

So I made these black paintings with that in mind. Also, they always said you shouldn't paint with black, it's not a color, so I painted a whole painting black. I made a series where the entire canvas is black but I did it modulated by using different blacks, or sometimes I put gray in with the black, or a little metallic paint. There's one of those paintings now at the Brandeis Museum collection, and Mr. Alan Stone (?) of the Alan Stone Gallery in New York has most of the others. I don't own any.

ROBERT BROWN: Were these pretty big?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, they were about maybe five foot eight or seven on the horizontal, by about 30 or 33 inches vertical. I continued to make those when I got back from Germany teaching in New Paltz at the State University of New York, with Jules Olitski and William Daley, the ceramist.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you happen to go there to work?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, when I came back from Germany I needed a job in order to exist. I had a wife, no children yet. So I wanted to stay on the Eastern seaboard. When I applied for the Fulbright I thought, "I can't afford to move to New York, but if I can get a Fulbright, they'll drop me off the boat in New York when I come back. I'll have had the year in Europe and all that entails, and when it finishes I'll be in New York City, which is where I'd like to go. From that point on I'll have to think of how I'll exist."

So I gave my name to several placement agencies in New York, which sent me to Florida and a few places. At the last minute this job opened up at New Paltz, New York, and that was only about an hour's drive from New York City. So as an artist I thought "this is convenient" and took the position, teaching painting and drawing. Jules Olitski and I became very good friends there. At that time he was in the "art brut" movement, having returned from Paris where he'd lived for a number of years. He's a native New Yorker, so it's good for me to know him and he told me about things an artist could do in the city. So I went there usually about one every 14 days and enjoyed it very much.

ROBERT BROWN: You became a member of the Stable Gallery in New York.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. When I got back from Germany and got settled I went down there, looking for a New York gallery. I remember going to one run by a woman who's quite famous, I can't recall her name at the moment, who was having a show of Willi Baumeister. I was just seven days, maybe two weeks, off the boat from Germany, and went up to see the show. I was the only person in the gallery and she came out and asked, "Do you like Willi Baumeister's painting?" because she assumed I lived in New York. Having just left Willi a couple of weeks ago, I was (laughing) already pretty familiar with his work, but she didn't that.

Then I went over to a place called the Stable Gallery, having seen an ad in the paper about the show that looked interesting. There were Andy Warhol, Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, and Marca-Relli. So I showed my paintings, she said she liked them, would show them there. Something happened, I don't know to this day what, but she became disenchanted and asked me to take my

paintings out, so I did. I was almost in a show in the Stable ---- the entrance sloped where horses used to come in --with Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Cy Twombly, Andy Warhol and me.

ROBERT BROWN: Who was the lady who asked you to pull out?

ROBERT NEUMAN: I can't recall her name now... She was the originator of the Stable Gallery, at least she was associated with it somehow to the Company.

ROBERT BROWN: That hadn't panned out. (Neuman confirms) Before you'd left Europe -- I just want to ask --you said you did go to Paris at least once and got to know a couple of artists there.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. I traveled a good deal but the German winter was pretty long, so my plan was to stay and paint for about six months, then to travel. Thinking "I may never be here again, I'll do a lot of travelling in the next four months and paint intermittently." So that's what I did. At one point Fulbright said "we'll take everybody to West Berlin and you can visit there, peek over the Wall, and so forth." I thought, well, my time schedule was to go to Paris, so I went there instead.

I visited Georges Mathieu. That was very interesting. He took me in his old Rolls Royce to his house to look at his paintings. Initially he thought I was Barnett Newman until I explained that I wasn't, but he remained nice and pleasant.

I visited Jean Paul Riopelle, a Canadian French painter, just a few days before Pierre Matisse was to arrive from New York, so all his paintings were standing up there in his studio waiting for Matisse to select some for the New York show. That was very good and he took me down to the corner for an absinthe.

ROBERT BROWN: So each of these men was quite hospitable.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh, very hospitable. In 1950 American artists in Europe were very scarce; we were the first American artists that they'd seen in Germany, as far as I could tell. Later on when I went to Spain on a Guggenheim, I must have been the second or third American artist there also, because everybody was very friendly and you were definitely a rarity.

ROBERT BROWN: Can you describe your teaching at New Paltz -- how did you go about it? You'd taught out in the San Francisco area, of course.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Before that, let me mention that I went to Italy, England, and Ireland -- caught the boat back from there --but when I was in Rome I made a friendship with Alberto Burri, the great Italian collage artist, a very wonderful person. He was married to an American girl who had a modern dance studio in Rome. He was very kind and helpful to me while I was there.

I didn't study with them at all, I just visited them, checked in on what they were doing with their work, what their thoughts were about their work, what their feelings were about American art. At that time there was this situation called "the International Style" whereby a certain kind of abstract art was intended to be international in nature. Part of it came from World War II, part mirrored itself in the United Nations and other ways, where people wanted to be more universal, less parochial and separated. That's all gone but it lasted for many years -- that you could see a painting made in Norway or Ceylon and understand it, and you could see a painting made in San Francisco and Cairo and understand it. That was the idea, to have one art for all people, not break it all into small splinters according to cultures all the time.

ROBERT BROWN: Is that maybe one reason why artists were so welcoming of one another?



ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, I think so. There's always been an international camaraderie amongst artists. They were, until recently, few in number and they have generally nothing to help them, they have to do it all on their own pretty much. Although in Europe in recent years that's changed with government subsidies and such --

ROBERT BROWN: At that time, they, like the Americans, were pretty much on their own.

ROBERT NEUMAN: On their own financially and every other way. So they enjoyed seeing each other and discussing philosophies of art and seeing that you too had survived, so to speak. Because the artist really has to do everything very much on his own, and that's probably the god saving part about it -- that you don't get a great deal of help. Because a Fulbright grant wasn't so much a matter of art as it was international understanding being its purpose.

ROBERT BROWN: You weren't exactly given a stipend that allowed you to live very well.

ROBERT NEUMAN: No. You had \$110 a month to live on in Germany, which was quite a bit of money when you consider post-war exchange, but whether you were married or single you got the same amount and I had my wife with me, so there were two of us living on it.

ROBERT BROWN: In Rome did you find even then a number of Americans? Not too many but there were a number who stayed on there for some time.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, there were some. I didn't visit any American artists in Rome, although I saw some of their work in a place called Gallery Schneider, which used to be very near the Spanish Steps; to the best of my knowledge it's no longer there. I enjoyed the Italian artists very much. The abstract artists of Italy were a little bit sweet and romantic because Italians are very friendly people and their artists are very warm emotionally. It's similar to comparing Futurism or Metaphysical painting; De Chirico with Cubism. There's that kind of a difference there. Italians are incredibly humanistic in their work.

ROBERT BROWN: The younger German students, you said, were painting in browns --

ROBERT NEUMAN: Black, brown, whatever was cheap because they didn't have any money --

ROBERT BROWN: They were at a very minimal level then --

ROBERT NEUMAN: Paint-wise, food-wise and every other wise.

ROBERT BROWN: What did you see in Paris?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh, Paris was very different, because money was flowing there in the art world. Riopelle, for instance, was showing with Pierre Matisse and people were buying all his paintings right and left. Georges Mathieu was showing with Kootz. I think it was and he had some kind of a public relations business of his own on the side with one of the big French passenger shipping lines. Paris seemed to be running very well when I was there as compared with Germany.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you ever give a thought to staying on in Europe?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Later when I got a Guggenheim Fellowship and was in Italy, I made an exhibition in Venice in 1956 or '57, the man who owned the gallery later came to New York and offered me a contract to return to Italy. But I was having marital problems, my life didn't care much to live in Europe, which would have made it difficult.

ROBERT BROWN: You taught at New Paltz for just one year, is that right?

ROBERT NEUMAN: No. I was there... let's see: I got back from the Fulbright in '54. It seems to me it was slightly more than a year. I taught the summer school too. One reason I left there was because that campus of the State University of New York never had a Guggenheim Fellow on its faculty in its history, and when I received one to go to Spain and paint, I asked for a leave of absence and the president turned me down. So I resigned and left. Everybody in the art department left, I would say, the chairman, Olitski, and everybody en masse; maybe one or two remained.

ROBERT BROWN: Hadn't that been like a local state teachers college until recently?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. When Rockefeller became Governor he poured funds into the art departments of the State University, but that didn't happen until after I left.

ROBERT BROWN: What were your students like there at that time?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, there was a growing out of a teacher's college into more of a state college and they were betwixt and between. They were very good students, I enjoyed them there, there were kids from farms and kids from the city and kids scattered all over New York and probably from elsewhere. But it was a rudimentary art department because it was betwixt and between, growing from a teachers college into a state college and they hadn't got it accomplished it yet. But it was a pleasant place to teach, a little town by the river there, in the Dutch Huguenot country. It was a historic place, we had a nice old gingerbread house to live in. I painted in the garage. I put a coal-burning stove there in the winter. I worked on the Black Paintings there. So it wasn't a bad place to work at all, actually. I even got drafted into teaching some art history, which I wasn't really prepared to teach but I could do a little bit of it. But the president of the college was one of those people who thought Ezra Watt [phon.] was the only person who should be allowed to paint pictures, so he was not too friendly to the art department.

ROBERT BROWN: How had Jules Olitski happened to be there?

ROBERT NEUMAN: He came the same way I did, looking for a position. He'd been living in Paris for some years and I believe he'd gotten a divorce, had a daughter who was in New York City with his parents. So he was looking for a place to teach. He was a very good teacher, an extremely intellectual person, very well-read. He was very much involved in Dubuffet "art brut"-Karel Appel orientation but it was non-figurative. But he was a very intelligent person. After he left there and went to New York City he struck it rich with Clement Greenberg and got into color field painting. We haven't seen much of each other since then. He's very well recognized now. But I'm more inclined to Expressionism, so we had a completely separate attitude toward painting. But he did do a very kind thing. He took some of my drawings to Clement Greenberg once but he didn't like them. Clement Greenberg helped Olitski get into New York galleries and all that sort of thing.

ROBERT BROWN: Greenberg was at the peak of his power then, wasn't he.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes he was.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you happen to look into getting a Guggenheim Fellowship? You must have thought you needed --

ROBERT NEUMAN: I didn't know what a Guggenheim Fellowship was, because I spent most of my time painting when I wasn't teaching and I had no idea what it was. I thought it was just strictly for men and women of letters, but a faculty member, whose wife is a sculptress who showed at Martha

Jackson was going to get one because she had recommendations to these people at the Museum of Modern Art. So I was still a hillbilly from Idaho and I thought, "Well, I'll try this thing too."

So I wrote for those papers. I didn't have anybody at the Museum of Modern Art or any other prestigious people to recommend me, so I had the local librarian at the college, who doubled as the art historian, and Felix Rubelow, [phon.sp.] a professor of art at the University of California/Berkeley, write for me. He didn't know my work too well but he was kind enough to write a letter. Plus a few local people. And I'll be darned if they didn't send me a telegram that I had a Guggenheim. So in a very short time we packed up and went to Spain, to Barcelona.

ROBERT BROWN: You'd specified you wanted to go to Spain?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. This was 1956 when I'd be there for a year and I specified that I wanted to go to Barcelona because any place that has Gaudi, Picasso, Miro, Julio Gonzales, there must be something there and I would like to look into this a little bit on all levels -- intellectual, emotional, and artistic. That's why I wanted to go there, so they sent me there and it was a very fruitful period for me.

ROBERT BROWN: When you went over, you were still doing more or less your Black Paintings.

ROBERT NEUMAN: I was. And when I got to Barcelona I rented an unfurnished flat and one of the bedrooms I used as a studio. I was so impressed by Spain, and Barcelona in particular -- the mysticism in Spanish culture is very strong, it's in their art, it's very deep --

ROBERT BROWN: This struck you right away.

ROBERT NEUMAN: It got to me right away. The light around Barcelona was very interesting. Any little thing seems to be very chromatic. I started painting with -- Spanish paint companies produced for artists these beautiful grays. I hadn't painted with gray before because I thought it was a neutral color, but the atmosphere and the light were such that even grays seemed to contain a great deal of color. So I started using gray in many of the paintings but not all of them and the light had a tremendous effect on the way I painted there.

I also had an experience. I was sitting in a cafe in [place name] and I looked up a certain calle there: the sun was on the other side of the buildings where I was, the street was so narrow that the sunlight coming through it looked like a needle, optically. It struck me as having a very interesting compositional potential. So I made a whole series of paintings called "Barcelona Paintings," I don't know how many there are, quite a few, there are some here in Boston; Allan Stone of the Allan Stone Galleries owns a large number of them; and Senator Jack Heinz, who was killed in an airplane accident recently, bought one, which was then chosen by the Carnegie Institute for the Carnegie International Exhibition and later taken into their collection. Its title is "Piso Secundo" [phon.sp.]

This was a red painting but the Barcelona period paintings are divided between the gray paintings and these that have a great deal of red. I stopped using black. When I got to Spain I wanted to relate to where I was and the Spanish culture and life, which were incredibly interesting to me. I'd like to go back there again if I could but I painted all my painting in Spain of various parts of the city in Barcelona and most of them, the red ones, had this central vertebrae running through the middle, vertically, and they were very well received when I came back to this country. I made some more, a lot of them, in my studio in 1958, '59, '60, in Brookline Village and I showed them at the original Pace Gallery in Boston, which moved to New York later. The exhibitions were very well received, they were sold out as a matter of fact, in Boston as the town was having a small renaissance, I

discovered when I came here from Barcelona after the Guggenheim was over. These Barcelona paintings went into many collectors' homes in Boston. They were very well received.

ROBERT BROWN: You've mentioned the grays of Barcelona, you mentioned this striking visual phenomenon of the needle-like light into a narrow street. You also mentioned earlier the mysticism of Spanish culture. Could you explain how you think that filtered into your --

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, I'm a very imaginative person, and that's why many art dealers in the current scene at this moment in history won't associate with me because it's not fashionable to be imaginative any more, you need to be a sort of halfway Marcel Duchamp today. They think painting is dead. But being an imaginative person in all ways -- in my mind, in my colors, in my hand when I draw and so forth, in my liking for certain artists -- when I found what I determined to be a very mystical quality, that stimulated me very much.

The imagination, religious and mystical conditions as you see sometimes in paintings of Tapies and many other Spanish artists, these things are close together -- mysticism and imagination. They often go together because in order to be mystical in a painting, you have to find out the way to do that, because you have to take something, usually pigment, and put it on a piece of cloth. Well, that's an imaginative act, to do that. And then you have to judge it, intellectually and so on, to see if you're there, that you've arrived at the right place.

But I was never a religious person and still am not in an orthodox way, but I was very impressed by Spain and the general mysticism in the culture and in all the arts and everywhere you look. Having been in Europe before, it wasn't necessary that I'd be impressed by this, because I'd been in Germany, Italy, Ireland and every place else where there was plenty of religion. But the Spanish way is another way. It harks back to the old saw that "Europe stops at the Pyrenees." The Moorish influence in Spain is so inbred that no one even thinks much about it but it's in that Spanish life, too; there's such a mixture of things in the Spanish culture.

Some years later I went back to Spain. On our honeymoon we went to the Alhambra and the whole thing came back again. But when I lived in Barcelona on the Guggenheim, I had a habit of going for walks through the city to different barrios and I would always investigate different museums and artistic monuments and so on. One day I found myself -- I'd gone to buy a pair of handmade shoes for hiking and failing to remember where the place was, finally found it. It was a workers' area -- dingy -- this was during Franco's time running Spain and dingy apartment blocks. Walking down the street to get the shoes, I had some kind of a mystical experience myself. Looking down the street as I walked, I thought I saw an apparition. The strangest kind of surreal experience, the only time in my life I'd ever had that kind of experience. It could be just that I was heightened emotionally; being there meant a great deal to me.

I visited a large number of Spanish artists -- J. J. Tharrats, Tapies, Rafols Cassamada, and many others. I made a show there at Sala Vayreda on R Catalonia, I think it was. During conversation with various Spanish artists, some of them would ask me if I was "Catolico," and I'd say, "no, I'm not a Catholic." They'd say, (he laughs) "Too bad." It had something to do with getting into certain galleries there. Many people painted pseudo-religious paintings -- they painted monks and things like that.

My exhibition in Barcelona was reviewed in an interesting way which relates to what I just said. Once the exhibition was up, I went downtown and bought a newspaper, stopped in the gallery to see if they knew of any reviews of the exhibition. There was one, in a thing called (says he can't recall now) a slip-covered magazine published by, of all things, monks above Barcelona some place

toward Tibidavo [phon.sp.]. These monks were writers, men of literature, and this monk had written such an interesting review that I translated it to English and sent it to Italy, because I went from Barcelona to Venice and made a one-man exhibition there at the Galleria del Cavallino just off San Marco.

Then the Italians translated that review from English into Italian. We used it in the announcement there -- that's how impressed I was with it, I liked very much what he said. There was another review in a Barcelona paper.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you ever get to know the monk?

ROBERT NEUMAN: No, I never met the man.

ROBERT BROWN: That wasn't the monks at Montserrat, was it?

ROBERT NEUMAN: It was up there some place, I never went up there either although I lived in an apartment at the foot of the hill, the cliffs, practically.

ROBERT BROWN: So you did these ones that you describe, this kind of painting, and also it's at this time that you began your Pedazos Del Mundo series. Maybe we can talk

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ROBERT NEUMAN: The Pedazos Del Mundo series came from having lived in Spain but I didn't start them until I got back to this country. I started them in Brookline Village in a little room I rented. That was an interesting thing, because when I came to Boston from Spain, I was unemployed because I'd left the State University of New York. So I went around on the bus, I didn't have any money, to the Rhode Island School of Design and different places looking for job. Nobody had any jobs for me.

So I started painting houses in New Paltz, New York, where I'd been living. The president of the Massachusetts College of Art sent a telegram, "We have a position for you." So I crawled off the housepainter's ladder and went back to Boston and took this job at the College, teaching lithography and drawing. I'd applied there and been interviewed but they weren't sure there was a job. The man who became president had given up the lithography job, an artist himself, a very nice man. I can't think of his name now, an exceptionally nice person.

On arriving in Boston I immediately went down to Newbury Street to the Swetzoff Gallery -- by sheer coincidence, the best gallery in town for abstract art, which was just coming into Boston. Hyman Swetzoff -- he was a poet also -- was a very good friend of Hyman Bloom. He was married to the daughter of the publisher of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Edward Weeks. I had some calligraphic drawings on paper, which Swetzoff looked at, said he liked them and wanted to see the paintings. I showed him the Black Paintings first and he liked those, and he showed them, with David von Schlegel, Albert Alcalay, Harold P , Mary A.....da, Hyman Bloom, Bobby Eshew, [all phon.sps.] and a few others.

I needed a studio. I told him I didn't have any money for a studio, we could just pay our rent where we lived. We had a child then. He said, "Well, I know somebody inspecting the Philippine Islands, in Manila, who told me to send him a drawing of a young American artist whose work is interesting. So give me one of those drawings you showed me." He sent it to this man, he bought it, I got \$50, and that was enough to pay the first month's rent on the studio. So I moved into the studio in Brookline

Village.

The next studio was Albert Alcalay, who was a displaced person from, well, he was born in Paris but he lived most of his life in Yugoslavia. He showed in the same gallery, so we became friends, having adjoining studios there. I'd never sold any paintings -- oh, I'd sold one or two, I guess, but he sold a large number of paintings quite consistently.

ROBERT BROWN: Did he have a more marketable way of painting, do you think? Or --

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, he had met people here because he was a displaced person. He'd been in concentration camp in Italy, he'd met people here and they followed his work a good deal. He also had a small school there in his studio for children. Their parents would come and in that way he began to sell a few paintings.

But that's when the Pedazos Del Mundo started. My paintings are -- I'm a thematic painter, now that we look back after a few years. The first theme was Black Paintings. Then came the Barcelona pictures, the second theme. The third theme was Pedazos Del Mundo. I started the Pedazos paintings there. I still had this idea of the International Style in the back of my mind. I thought to myself, "What is it that all people could understand?" I said, "Well, they certainly know that the world is round, more or less. And everybody's interested in the world, it's all we've got, we're standing on."

So I said, "I'll paint paintings of the world." And I made these big circles. I made a great many of the Pedazos Del Mundo, number one, two, three, four, five, six like that. There are mixed-media drawings and there are lithographs; no etchings; and there's watercolors. By the time I got them finished, it took quite a while, and I never showed them to Swetzoff because a graduating student in my Massachusetts College of Art class, named Arnold Glimcher, came to me one day and said, "Mr. Neuman, I'm going to start an art gallery and I'd like to show your paintings."

Arnold was not exactly an enthusiastic art student, and I said, "Arnold, I don't think you could sell my paintings. Don't you think you should maybe use some other artists who are more saleable and so forth if you're into it as a business." He said, "No, I'd like to try." So he opened a gallery on Newbury Street two doors down from Swetzoff. I told Swetzoff I was going to leave and I moved to the initial Pace Gallery, which is now one of the most famous galleries in New York City.

ROBERT BROWN: What did Swetzoff say when you said you were leaving? What was he like, too -- maybe you can describe him.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Hyman Swetzoff was a very interesting fellow. He had a brother named Seymour Swetzoff who ran a frame shop, who was into Far Eastern mysticism. They were both disciples intellectually, and Seymour painted some, they were very close to Hyman Bloom. That's one reason I left his gallery, because he had the best gallery up till then on Newbury Street. He had Ohashi, the Japanese painter, and there were some abstract things in there, but essentially he was mostly oriented toward Hyman Bloom's work -- this kind of Expressionism --

ROBERT BROWN: It wasn't much like your work at all --

ROBERT NEUMAN: No, it's not the same Expressionism I'm involved in at all.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you particularly sympathetic to it?

ROBERT NEUMAN: No, I didn't like it because it was, in my opinion, a kind of nervous Expressionism and dwelt on things which were not interesting to me -- tortured bodies and things of this nature.

Leonard Baskin the printmaker was involved in this too and it came out of the Boston Museum school, with Boston arts Aronson.

But I stayed there, since it was the best gallery. But then when this student opened up a gallery, the Pace Gallery, we saw a chance for a new gallery in which we could have a chance to say who showed in the gallery; the artists could have something to say about that and possibly have an even finer gallery in Boston. That was our thought. We subsequently made sure he showed Mirko Basaldella, the sculptor at Harvard, and Henry Moore, and Hans Arp, and all kinds of people that were interesting. I sold out a couple of painting shows there, and a drawings show. He was a tremendous young dealer.

ROBERT BROWN: Did he have a good deal of backing? How did he --

ROBERT NEUMAN: He had a lot of backing, that's right, from his brother and some other people. His mother worked in the gallery, and she was a wonderful person, I enjoyed her very much. But you have to understand that Boston was a boom town at this time. A cultural renaissance was taking place in Boston. It was nothing like it is today. People were making a great deal of money in industries and so on and prices of art had not caught up with the boom, so as we look back upon it things were relatively inexpensive compared to the money people had in their pocket.

So people were collecting art like mad. I can remember one, maybe within a week practically, every gallery on the street sold out their shows. It was unbelievable. I didn't think about it at the time, but now as I look back on it I realize what it was. So I went there.

Then the Pace Gallery decided that Boston was too small a town, he wanted to be an internationally known art dealer. So he moved to New York. He offered to me to come with him, but he was getting into --me and Louise Nevelson were the people he wanted to take with him to New York -- but this is the story of my life: I'm always the one of the first exhibitions of American artists in Spain, or Germany, the American art, in Washington, D.C. one of the early exhibitions of Abstract art. So I never benefited too much from it.

But Arnold Glimcher who ran the Pace Gallery was glad to move to New York and he wanted to take Louse Nevelson and me, he told me. But at the same time he was getting very heavily into Pop Art because that was the trend --

ROBERT BROWN: He went about in the early 60s then, I guess.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes it was, right in there. He was getting into this and starting to show it in Boston, all the Pop artists. Sam Hunter, who came here to run the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis, a former curator at the Museum of Modern Art, said, "Aha! So now we're going to have low art and high art with the advent of Pop Art." Pop Art turns me sour, I dislike Pop Art with a fervor.

ROBERT BROWN: You agreed with Hunter that it was a low art form.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, Mr. Hunter went with it because he's the curator and the trouble with American curators is they go with whatever tendency comes down the pike. It's getting a little old at this time but at that time I despised Pop Art because it's very close to commercial art and it's mass-produced and it's the antithesis of the way great art has always been made and maybe there's a reason it's always been made that way. So I told Arnold I wasn't interested in going to New York. He was saddened by that but they went.

ROBERT BROWN: He, in your experience, had been a pretty decent --

ROBERT NEUMAN: He was very decent to me. Swetzoﬀ seldom sold my work, so my economic situation didn't improve much with him but I had no complaints, he was very kind and he was a creative person himself. Contrary to most dealers, he would hang art that he thought was very inventive and creative on its own stakes rather than whether it was in the trend or mode of the moment. That was the wonderful thing about Hyman Swetzoﬀ. And it was a wonderful thing about Glimcher too, but as time went on he wanted to be successful in a monetary way, so he went the other way.

ROBERT BROWN: This is a good time in Boston too -- you sold out shows --

ROBERT NEUMAN: It was amazing.

ROBERT BROWN: You mentioned Sam Hunter coming to Brandeis and Thomas Messer comes to Contemporary Art about that time. Did you get to know him a bit?

ROBERT NEUMAN: I got to know Tom Messer very well, and his wife. He ran the Institute of Contemporary Art the way it should be run, in my opinion, and they haven't done that in a long time but he had a curator who was a young girl, Anne Jenks was her name, a very learned girl from Smith College, who spent 50% of her time touring artists' studios. So when they made a show at the Institute, they knew what was around here, that you didn't have to send to Paris for. So on a low budget they could have very, very exciting shows. Now they don't do that at the Institute of Contemporary Art any more, they don't do anything like it.

So all we artists in the area were in the Institute exhibitions and they came to the exhibitions and the ICA was the spark. It was a very lively place even though it moved about three times. But the whole art community was there, the artists were there, the collectors were there, the university communities were there at the opening. So it was really a stimulating place to go. Now the ICA it seems to me now is more or less a social club -- they stop in for a drink on the way home to dinner or something, it's not very interesting to me from my point of view.

ROBERT BROWN: Messer, you mentioned, wrote up your Barcelona paintings for an Italian magazine.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, there was a magazine called "Evento" published in Venice; Tony Toniato, [phon.sp.] an Italian Abstract painter in Venice, told me about it. They asked me to submit something about American artists, and I did. I got hold of one of the original members of the San Francisco school, Hassel Smith -- I knew he'd written some things -- and asked him to send it in. The Italian magazine did a terrible thing: they lost the manuscript. The artist had done a rather silly thing, sent the original from California instead of making a copy; pretty amateurish. So there was some hard feelings there.

There was more than one issue -- I sent some work on Jules Olitski, and Edith Smith and some other Americans too to Time Magazine when they approached me over there to send some information in.

ROBERT BROWN: You were also showing -- this is in the late 50s -- when you first joined the Alan Stone Gallery in New York, right?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. Mr. Stone had been going to Harvard, then he went to law school at B.U., so he was living up here in Cambridge quite a while. I met him at the De Cordova Museum in Lincoln one day at an exhibition, Albert Alcalay and I were there because we had works in the show. A



Boston Globe photographer was taking our picture and there was this gentleman hanging around who finally came and asked if he could speak to me, it was Alan Stone. He said he was thinking of opening a gallery in New York City and he'd like to look at some of my paintings. He subsequently acquired a large number.

At one point he came to my house in Brookline and said, "How much for everything in the house??" He bought everything in the house, but of course he got a bulk rate! (Brown laughs) He is the large collector of my paintings in the United States. Allan Stone lives in Purchase, N.Y. and of course has a gallery on Madison Avenue.

ROBERT BROWN: But from him, you've had a sort of unvarying deal, right?  
It's been consistent, but on the other hand --

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, he's been consistent over the years, he's shown my work a couple of times in small one-man shows. But New Yorkers don't seem to respond to my paintings much, but nonetheless he consistently acquires one or two or three at a time. So he's been very good to me and we're very good friends today. As time has gone on, his gallery has gone in a little different direction. He's into Naturalism more now than he used to be. He's had shows of course; Richard Estes and Wayne Thiebaud are his major artists he shows most of the time.

ROBERT BROWN: Artists like that would you lump to a degree with the Pop artists?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. I don't think Thiebaud considers himself a Pop artist but he uses Pop subject matter in a similar way that Pop artists do. I knew Thiebaud when I lived in California, he made his living as a commercial artist then, and you can see that in his paintings: there's very much a layout attitude in his paintings.

I never met Richard Estes till I started going to summer up in Northeast Harbor, Maine, because Alan Stone owned three houses up there and he traded one to me for some paintings and traded the other one to Richard Estes for some paintings, and Alan lived in the other one. So we see each other all summer long. I show in a gallery up there now, called the Insbruck [sp] Gallery, run by "Thistle", Miss Aurelia Brown, of New York City.

It's just a summer gallery but she's very "loose" in the sense of her philosophy of life, she leaves the artists alone. You bring whatever paintings you want, she doesn't select them, you can have something to say about the hanging of the exhibition if you wish, and she's willing to listen to new ideas, what you should show and shouldn't show. I wouldn't bother with a summer gallery except that I had extraordinary good luck there -- it's a very affluent area in the summer. There are collectors there from London. I sold some paintings to London from there, and Washington, DC, and Detroit, New York. There are people there from Monte Carlo, it's a very international community. That's what makes it interesting for me to exhibit there in the summer.

ROBERT BROWN: Stone, on the other hand, you've mentioned, has said he wants you to be consistent, that's what sells and that sort of thing. He would like to manipulate you, if he could?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, I don't think he would do that at all, but I did ask him once, since he was a successful New York art dealer what he would say it is that makes certain artists successful in New York. And he said, "You've got to have something recognizable in painting, you've got to have large production, and you've got to have a dealer that controls the production." Which is pretty much what they all do. There are times when there are few paintings available and there are times when there are a lot available -- it doesn't necessarily have to do with artists' production.

ROBERT BROWN: But, rather, the dealers parceling it out.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, the dealer's perception of how to deal in art.

ROBERT BROWN: What the market will bear.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You continued teaching at the Massachusetts College of Art. Then in 1960 you taught at Brown University. Were you there for a bit?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, I was enjoying Massachusetts College of Art, and I was paid, I think, \$3,800 a year --

ROBERT BROWN: You mentioned you liked the students there, they were from all sorts of backgrounds.

ROBERT NEUMAN: It's true. I did enjoy professional art schools a good deal because at that time, in '50, 60s, and after that the College was called colloquially "Mass Art" because the masses went to that professional art school. Most art schools are expensive, so you don't find the masses there. But this is the only state-owned art school in the United States, and one of the very earliest art schools founded in the United States -- it was founded during Revolutionary War times to do decorative work such as wrought iron and such. I enjoyed it there because of the spread of the students. There are also foreign students there. But I knew other artists in this area. Some were at Brown University -- Hugh Townley the wood sculptor --

ROBERT BROWN: Was he doing his sort of fit-it-together work at that time?  
He's been doing it consistent for a long time.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, he's a student of Zadkine and after the War he stayed on the GI Bill in Paris and studied there. Many other American artists after the War studied with Leger. Many stayed there many, many years -- Jason Berger [phon. sp.] is another one who was there at the time, and Harold Tovish. They all live here in Boston.

Walter Feldman was the chairman of the art department at Brown University. I didn't know him very well -- oh no: he wasn't the chairman yet, George Downing was, an art history professor at the University of Chicago, a very fine man. I went down there because I thought it was a school with a higher intellectual interest in art than the one I was in. Sure enough, they gave me a part-time job.

I told the new president of the Massachusetts College of Art, kind of a political type of appointee, and he said, "That's against the law, you're full-time here, you can't teach down there." And I said, "Well, I'll have to leave but it's only part-time down there." He said, "Well, we'll look the other way for a little while." I told him it was only for a semester, because I wanted to see what I was getting into.

So then I subsequently decided to go there and left Mass Art and went to Brown. I commuted, I guess it was close to full-time. But then Harvard brings Le Corbusier here and builds a building next to the Fogg Museum and they have no one to teach there; Boston was really booming in those days culturally and every way you can think of. They brought Mirko Basaldella, the sculptor, from Italy, to be head of the program --

ROBERT BROWN: Had you known him in Italy at all?

ROBERT NEUMAN: No, I didn't, I knew of his brother, Afro the painter, more. But Albert Alcalay who had the adjoining studio was hired because he was a good speaker but also because he was bilingual in Italian and English; Mirko's English wasn't very good.

ROBERT BROWN: So you left Brown fairly readily, then.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, I went there and showed them my paintings, and I recall that one of the professors at Brown, the art historian William Georgi [phon.sp.] was lecturing at Harvard at the time in this building even though he was on the faculty of Brown. He saw my paintings in the chairman's office and said, "What are your paintings doing up there at Harvard?" I said, "Well, what are you doing up there, you're lecturing at Harvard --(he laughs) I'm also interested in these things." Mirko said they needed somebody who could do everything, because most of the people did one thing -- one person did Photography, one person did Design, one person did Sculpture, but nobody could do everything.

So I said, "I can do everything." He wanted somebody to teach Silk Screen and some Printmaking. So I'm not the best in the world at that but I knew enough about it for the level they had at that. So they invited me to come there. So I left Brown and went to Harvard. I took a cut in salary and began teaching in the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you glad to leave Brown? Had you gotten what you could --

ROBERT NEUMAN: No, I liked Brown a lot, they were very nice people, they're very interesting people, they understood art very well down there. They weren't into the trends, they were solid intellectuals, historians, and the art faculty was very simpatico. They had good people there, I liked it a lot. As I look back on it, it really was a tossup. Once I got to Harvard I discovered to my chagrin that something which was a really an albatross around everybody's neck at the Carpenter Center: the architects controlled the Center --

ROBERT BROWN: The architects over at the School of Design?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, the architects in Harvard. They had very close rapport, a lot to say about everything that went on there. So there was an unwritten rule: the director came from Vienna and he was an architectural historian --

ROBERT BROWN: Seckler?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, and he brought people from Austria and Germany all the time. People used to say you needed a reisepaste to take a class at Carpenter Center. There was an unspoken rule or condition that you should not teach art, you should teach visual design and make sure that that's what it was. So --

ROBERT BROWN: What is that?

ROBERT NEUMAN: -- here we were, Mirko, a famous sculptor, and I'm a painter, Alcalay is a painter, and so on -- and the students want to know about art: they told them to go to the Fogg Museum or to leave Harvard and go to an art school, that "we teach visual design." Visual design is what an architect does when he designs a building, he designs it visually on a piece of paper, the intensity of interest in self-expression is very little.

Consequently, I was always getting into trouble because they didn't want -- they called it narcissism and ego-centered and all sorts of -- if anything got expressive and Expressionism.

Gyorgy Kepes at MIT was a good friend of these people and he also felt, he even wrote this in some article I read I think in a Boston newspaper, about Expressionists being madmen and neurotics and so forth. Because these people believed so fervently in -- let's put it this way: their version of the Bauhaus.

You have to remember, there were two Bauhauses in Germany, and then there was one in Chicago. I think there were four or five Bauhauses by the time they got through with it. It still lingers at Harvard but it isn't as strong as it used to be.

ROBERT BROWN: So self-expression was "out."

ROBERT NEUMAN: It was verboten. The students were hungry for it. The whole purpose of the Carpenter Center when it was established was to release Harvard students from rigid intellectual endeavor, give them a chance to release their emotions some place. And Gropius was on the board of the group that founded Carpenter Center and he very much wanted artistic expression. But these other architects -- I was with him on visiting committees and he kept reminding them they should go more into creative work. They would always say yes, yes, and then they would go right back to the same thing.

You had to write up all your projects for the students and submit them to the director, and if he didn't like it he would complain to your boss -- mine was Mirko -- and ask him to change it. So there wasn't very much respect for individual artists at Harvard. It's a little different now, I think it's changed a lot but --

ROBERT BROWN: Did you get any feeling in his old age of how Gropius had been such a magnet in his time?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh, he was loved very much by the architectural community at Harvard.

ROBERT BROWN: By you, apparently, too.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, I enjoyed Gropius a great deal, because he liked art also, and he couldn't separate it from the students' experience in a visual center, but these other people could who were running the place. When Mirko died -- I was at Harvard nine years, we worked day and night there, were never full-time, I took a big cut in salary to go there, but I enjoyed it...I kept waiting for the day when we were going to grow sufficiently so we could bring art to the students and not simply visual design. "Perceptual design," for instance, they had Rudolf Arnheim there, he'd written several books which we used. It was that kind of orientation in the institution. It was artificially pressed into the students, in a way. The students didn't like it, on the whole.

So after nine years Mirko died and there was a big coup d'etat but the architectural types got even greater control, because Mirko being an artist had held them at bay to some extent. They got absolute control then, so I asked for tenure then. They said no, they don't tenure artists; anybody who's academic can be tenured but not artists. So I had to leave, but they gave me two years' notice, so it was all right, it was easier for me.

ROBERT BROWN: You left in 1972, something like that?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. It was right in the middle of the recession here and I had to drive around in my little old car, brownbag it all over New England. I went to 22 colleges in New England to look for a job and couldn't find one. I was driving down a highway in New Hampshire and saw a sign that said "Keene State College," I'd never heard of the place, it wasn't on my list to visit. So I drove in there,

visited with the dean of arts and humanities, and he said No, there's nothing here.

I came back to Boston. About five days later a letter came asking me to return. It turned out the art historian there had been a student of mine and they needed a chairman but the dean hadn't told me; he was considering someone else or something. So that being the only position available, I took it. I stayed as chairman five very difficult years because I inherited a small college art department that was no art department, there were art courses, they wanted an art department and wanted somebody to come and make one.

So that's what I did, but I couldn't get the cooperation of the faculty, they were on the whole because they were pro-union, didn't want to do any extra work, they'd been there so long they thought the classes belonged to them. I remember writing a letter to the dean, "Who owns the classes in the art department?" He said, "The State of New Hampshire does." So we had some very difficult times.

About 1972 I was divorced and left Harvard at the same time and had to find a new position. So it was a low time for me. I thought, "Now I'm going to be chairman here, I know how to make a good art department and I'm going to make a good one no matter what." So I started it and the blood flowed down the hallways. (Brown laughs) There were no new positions to hire new members and I had to do with the old. Some of these people were hired at a time when there was a shortage of college professors, they'd hired high school-quality people. So it was very hard to get a quality art department rolling. But I managed to fire an art educator and hire a sculptor and put in part-time people and we had a pretty good department going.

But after five years, I told them "I'm tired of pushing the wheel by myself, so you can have the wheel, the wagon, the whole works." And I took two years' leave of absence without pay, and lived for my paintings, and then I returned there, as a professor of painting until I retired. I was upset, then, because I'd put nine years there working day and night for peanuts, and the students were so depressed because they wanted to study art, they didn't mind studying visual design too, but we couldn't have both.

So they told me I had to leave -- subsequently they got rid of four or five other people too, but the students put up an exhibition in my honor in the Carpenter Center, of independent studies in painting, and nobody came except the students and me: not one member of the faculty came. So that was the story. When I left I wrote a 12-page letter -- it must have taken me three weeks to write the thing -- to the new president, President Bok, who'd been in his office maybe a week.

I explained what had happened in the history of Carpenter Center, because I wasn't there from the inception but I was there from the moment we moved into the Le Corbusier building. I explained to them how other private colleges and universities run their art centers, because Harvard had poured an immense amount of money into that to try to have that the best in the country and how in my opinion it had been aborted by trying to make a kind of an architectural center out of it and it was against the basic tenets that were laid down when the building was put together with regard to what the philosophy was to be as the future came on. I think it was against what Gropius wanted, too.

I received a small note from the president saying he'd just been in office a few days and hadn't had time to check into this. Subsequently a committee was appointed to investigate the Carpenter Center, but unfortunately as in most universities they appoint only tenured people in the department. So the same people who were running the place were the ones who were investigating it, with the exception of and a few people from the Fogg who definitely felt similar to

the way I did. Because being next door to the Fogg and pointing at Tintoretto, for example, they expected then the student could go next door and explore that in some way with pigments and drawing and so forth; that wasn't allowed.

After the investigation by that committee there were some changes made. Dimitri Hadzi came here from Rome to take Mirko's place --

ROBERT BROWN: He was allowed to teach sculpture.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. He was allowed to make some changes, but being new it was very hard for him to change it, it had to come from above some place. I can't tell you what happened about that, I don't think there was too much from above change coming. But eventually the director went into semi-retirement, other people became directors, and it's changed significantly now. Toshi [he can't recall last name], the Japanese designer, is now the head of it and he's quite fluid and has changed it a good deal.

They're right, there should be design there, but it should go beyond that. They felt that the students weren't capable of making painting art worth anything, therefore they shouldn't bother making it. That was their idea -- they couldn't make the finest because it wasn't a professional art school, but I reminded them that Harvard had other professional schools, such as medicine, engineering, and a few others. We did have quite a blowout there, it was really something, there were all kinds of meetings, and a year or two after I left several other people had to leave too.

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BEGINNING SIDE A, TAPE 3

ROBERT BROWN: In 1972 you joined the faculty at Keene State College, becoming chairman at some point. I think you've only recently retired from that position.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. I became chairman immediately upon arrival in Keene. I found a very small college without an art department, they wanted an art department, and so I proceeded to do everything I could within the limits of a small college to build a fine arts department.

It was a bit hard starting. I think we did wonders with a small staff. So I remained chairman for five years there. After five years the political situation in the school and the unions and affirmative action and things of that sort made it very hard to make progress. So I resigned as chairman. I took two years off without pay and returned to Waltham, Mass. and my studio, and worked there. I found that I had income from my paintings sufficient to live on during those two years, it was about the same as when I'd been teaching. I was quite surprised at that and --

ROBERT BROWN: By then you had Alan Stone buying regularly?

ROBERT NEUMAN: He didn't buy regularly but he buys sporadically, but he's an old acquaintance and has the largest collection of my work in the country. He may acquire works sporadically but he would never acquire one piece against his nature, he would always take two or three pieces, more sometimes. At one point early on when I was teaching at Massachusetts College of Art when I first came to Boston, he bought everything in my house. He liked to buy en masse if he liked the work; that seems to be his trademark.

After five years at Keene I resigned as chairman, then took the two years off and did a lot of work. I was surprised how quickly people responded to my work again once I returned to Boston. After two years I had to return to Keene or lose my job, so I returned as a professor of painting and stayed

there until taking early retirement a year and a half ago.

However, I'd married Mary Susan Savage, the art dealer in Boston. Our home was there and I commuted to New Hampshire but I was glad to get rid of that now, because I had to stay over a couple of nights each week.

ROBERT BROWN: What was there different about teaching? Was it the pupils maybe, the occasional student?

ROBERT NEUMAN: I'd say that was pretty much it. Although I enjoy all students if they are serious and want to learn, the trouble with a lot of American colleges today is art is treated as a kind of dose of therapy for students, so you get a pretty strong mix of good students and others. I enjoy them all, but if you don't have some good students, the teaching can be kind of dreary in terms of art. The other kinds of classes, such as art history and seminars in art history, maybe that's different, but studio courses can be pretty dreary if you don't have a few good students; they really make the thing.

I managed to develop in the small college three levels of painting plus independent studies, and we had a policy where you could repeat upper-level courses for credit if they were studio courses. So we accomplished quite a bit for a small school, actually.

ROBERT BROWN: Did it take you a bit of a fight to get that curriculum through?

ROBERT NEUMAN: We had an unusual arrangement, because the college is so small that we had one person in each field --one ceramist, one sculptor, one art historian, one painter, one printmaker, and so on. The main campus is in Durham, the University, and they somewhat looked down on us. But no, the faculty, I think, after a period of time was happy to see anything that would make the department grow. Initially it was a little difficult because some of the people had been there quite a while and didn't want much in the way of change and it was difficult politically and otherwise.

However, we had a wonderful president for about ten years. He'd come from Harvard and he was very conducive to any ideas I had. There was no problem there, but initially there were many problems with the faculty, senate and all the red tape you find in colleges. After a few years they got accustomed to our constantly changing things and they let us go at our own speed. We had a vital little art department there for a while, and we sent increasingly each year more students to graduate school from the art department and I was amazed at that. Some went to the Chicago Art Institute, and a number of other schools. I thought it was quite a good result considering the school was so small and had such a small faculty, because those kids were in competition with the big colleges for the graduate school slots, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Now you're able to devote yourself full-time to your work.

ROBERT NEUMAN: I think I've devoted myself full-time to my work all my life because it was necessary to teach in the daytime in order to pay the rent and take care of the children and my wife and so on, and so I painted also at the same time wherever I was. It amounted to pretty much two jobs a day. Sometimes I had to paint at night, sometimes I'd have night classes and would paint during the day. Because of commuting I always had to have more than one studio -- I'd paint up in New Hampshire, I'd paint down here. Summers in Maine I'd paint up there.

That doesn't bother me too much because when I went on the Guggenheim to Barcelona, I painted there, I left the studio here. If you had the inspiration and the inclination and determination to use

the inspiration, you could do it out in the driveway, I think! I really don't care too much about studios as long as they're functioning. The problem is to get one that's big enough so you can store up your work for many years -- as the years go by the number of pieces you're storing gets larger and larger. Almost all artists have a difficult time after a number of years having work space and storage space also, because the rents are sometimes significant. That's been my problem most recently, to have enough storage space also.

ROBERT BROWN: You started exhibiting by 1950 or so, when you were in San Francisco, in the Oakland area and in school. Maybe at this point we could talk a bit about the work that you were doing at that time. Do you want to get some examples out or something like that?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, when I went to California, as I mentioned earlier, I was a very naive person coming from the foothills of the Rockies who had never been in a museum before. So I saw a school in San Francisco in full blossom and as I said I didn't know what to think at first. I didn't reject it and I proceeded to find out what it was all about.

So I was very heavily influenced by all of that. Even today I still consider the influence of the so-called "ecole de Pacifique" or the San Francisco Style, it's really a West Coast style because it included Mark Tobey and other people on the West Coast, not only those in San Francisco, but even today I consider that a very big influence in my work.

ROBERT BROWN: In what way that you particularly --

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, it's a certain attitude toward painting. It has to do with a very abstract manner of expressing yourself whether you have subject matter or not in your painting, and the fact that you want the paint always to have some new challenge to you; and they are visually less related to the European way of painting, I mean the School of Paris. On the other hand, my own development was such that I had this initial impetus from the School of the Pacific, a set of people such as Curt Fitzgerald, Sam Francis, James Budd Dixon, Hassel Smith, and a number of others whom nobody hears much about any more -- Diebenkorn, David Park and a number of others.

The spirit and the freshness and the integrity and the intensity of these works were very interesting to me, and they made a big point of being separated from New York City, which they considered more to be the cashbox of the art world or the money machine. But if you wanted to go deeper into it, most New York painters of that time were very oriented toward the School of Paris.

So they had an antipathy toward the New York School. I had a similar feeling myself, so I think today even as I paint very much of the qualities found in the paintings of the School of the Pacific -- the big broad application, a lot of interest in surface, an expressionistic attitude toward whatever it is whether you use symbols or naturalism or whatever it is, not mimicking the School of Paris at all if you can help it.

However, I had this influence very strong and carry it with me even today. But when I went to Europe on the Fulbright and the Guggenheim, I was very influenced, never having been in Europe, I was searching around to see what was happening there and I came across Kandinsky and other artists, Fritz Winter, Tapiés, and Wols [he spells latter name] -- he's not so well-known, and De Chirico, and many people who were interesting to me -- Miro, Picasso and Matisse of course, and most recently I've enjoyed very much and have been doing some research into the color of Bonnard: I consider him a major, major painter.

So I developed this mix, then, between the School of the Pacific and certain contemporary



European ideas. I enjoy that, it offers me a lot of trouble and difficulties at times because it seems like an unlikely mix. But abstract painting is abstract painting. I don't think the School of Paris is of much interest any more in terms of contemporary art or art of the moment. As somebody once put it -- I think it was Larry Calcagno, the American artist -- once put it, "the European artists are not so interesting because they're carrying the history of Europe on their back when they try to paint."

We have a history too but we don't have this tremendous weight of Western culture on our back, and this has allowed American artists a lot of freedom. Consequently the American artist has a much more brassy quality to his paintings than the Europeans. And that's one of the interesting things about American art, that it is so directed, and it is brassy. And the European artist is often interested in sophistication and harmonizing and things of this nature. Part of the reason for that is this cultural backpack they've got to drag around with them and they have a hard time getting rid of it.

ROBERT BROWN: What happened to you when you were just starting and later in Barcelona? Did you absorb any of that baggage?

ROBERT NEUMAN: No. My first trip to Europe I had my eyes wide open and I hope my head was too so that I could absorb things, but I had no intention of letting it change drastically what I did. I wanted to know. After all, the revolution of modern painting that Matisse and Picasso and Rouault and so on brought about was before there was great change in this country in painting. So I was interested in that, to see the roots of things. And I visited a lot of museums, in Switzerland and everywhere, and I thought of it as a learning process, but always I kept this feeling of the West Coast in my work. I think I still do, although the critics in the East today, especially the younger ones, don't seem to mention that much, and I think the reason is they don't much about it themselves or they would be able to recognize it.

It is fused with certain European influences. I paid a certain price for that, because West Coast artists don't like that idea. East Coast artists work antithetic to West Coast and the idea of mixing it with Europe is a kind of strange thing. But after all painting is a very personal business, highly individualistic also. So it's not at all unlikely somebody could do something like this. And that's the interesting thing to me.

When I was in Barcelona on the Guggenheim, I started a series of paintings called "Barcelona Paintings." It was a strange thing because almost from the moment I had a room to paint in this flat where we lived, I started painting frantically right away; I didn't have any trouble at all adjusting to the Spanish environment. Each week I learned a little more about contemporary and ancient Spanish painting, and it influenced me but I put it through this sort of West Coast filter.

So I started this series, naming them after various sections of the city. I did make one-man exhibition in Barcelona and one in Venice at the time, but I brought them back here to Boston and they were quite well received here. So on my return to Boston I proceeded to produce Barcelona Paintings. When I finished that I started the next section, which I mentioned before, the Pedazos del Mundo, Pieces of the World. I made a large number of those also. It intrigued me -- the idea of the world as the subject matter. I like to paint something that though it's abstract, it's something that everyone can relate to --

ROBERT BROWN: Not necessarily recognize!

ROBERT NEUMAN: No, no, but can relate to it intellectually or emotionally or instinctively or somehow. So I thought everybody stands on the world, so I'll use the world as a visual image. And I

used tape to tape out the shape of the world, then I got into the graphic process of taping things and blocking out the colors and so on. That group was pretty well received, especially the drawings and things. Some of them were very large paintings. It's always difficult to get large paintings into anybody's collection because of the size: it's not the price, it's the size usually, people's walls and things don't seem to be large enough.

Today I don't make very many large paintings because I'm tired of storing them. And it's a big job to make large canvases. Someone once put it, "there are so many large paintings painted in this country in the last whatever, 30 years, that you put them end and end they'd probably go around the world." (laughter) My boss at Harvard, the Roman sculptor Mirko Basaldella, once said, "You can also make small masterpieces."

Today, I paint smaller canvases and I'm finding it more rewarding in certain ways in that I can make more paintings, financially speaking and time-wise, and it seems that the collectors themselves -- after all, you make a living, hopefully, from selling a few paintings -- they seem to be happy that they don't have to look at things 12 feet long and can find something 30 inches or so. Most of the early modern American painters - Stuart Davis and so on -- they made quite small paintings. The Hoppers are small, Paul Klee never made very large canvases.

ROBERT BROWN: How do you find -- did you sort of have to gear down, or -- ? How does it affect what you're doing?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, the phrase "action painting" or "abstract expressionist painting" was part of the West Coast interest in their school of painting but without a large canvas that part of it, direct painting is sometimes a little limited, but as you mature as an artist you understand better and more completely the concepts and theories you're dealing with, so that you can make certain adjustments for this. I found that to be the case.

But something else is very important, and that is, over the last ten years or so, I've realized that I paint with the full palette, full color. This is a very unusual thing today because most artists that you see, even some who are rather famous current artists, they key their paintings so drastically chromatically that the number of colors is very few, it becomes poster-esque and graphic in nature and less painterly. I find that I've been working with the full palette for a long time now and have all the mixes of colors available to me, am happy to have it and use it. I find that very few artists do that today. They limit themselves so much with the black and the red paint, or the blue and the yellow paint; like that.

I found that to be a detriment, because I'm very interested in the visual language and the visual illusion and using the full palette. While it's a heck of a job to respond to all the possibilities of the colors you have available to you, it is the way paintings were made for centuries. The potentiality of full-color painting is very great, especially illusionistically. More people are starting to recognize it -- I think you see in Diebenkorn also that full palette is a big thing and among many painters of the West Coast. People used to say, "oh, that's because you don't know enough about colors to simplify them." I don't believe that's the case at all. It's just that -- look at Bonnard's paintings: he has practically every color, so many color mixes in there, sometimes they're just tiny little swatches here and there but he uses full color.

I believe more and more that light and color is painting. I've spent a good deal of time lately trying to comprehend better the role of drawing versus painting, because I think there are many people today that are confused also in that they draw and fill in the drawing with colors, or they draw with colors in a brush and they call it a painting. I don't believe that's a painting. There are lots of

drawings on canvas these days. Full-color use in painting will reduce the drawing attitude and you get more into chromatic pigment and into visual illusion. I believe light and color are more and more the important elements in painting, not style and just the practicing of some theories. Which was a big item not long ago.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean, like what --

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, Albers, for instance, is a good example. Optical Art is another. Color Field painting is another. And Minimal Art -- there's very little "minimal art" painting because you have to build three-dimensional things to make Minimalism seem authentic. There was a time when the message was the theory and there are many people who did that. Optical Art, for instance, and Pop Art is another example. There is not any use of full color there. By "full color" I mean painterly full color.

There was a preconception that had been spread around that to make contemporary art it had to be large flat colors. Well, I passed through that some years ago. I find out that you can end up with designs very easily with large flat colors, that real pigment and light on a flat surface requires certain illusion not necessarily the historical types of illusion or illusionism, but it still requires that because you've got to distort the two-dimensional surface to make the painting. I don't paint with large flat areas any more. I did for some years until it became very boring and I found out I was veering toward design too much and I didn't want to be a designer.

ROBERT BROWN: So even within -- like, take this as one of the Alhambra [?] theories, I guess, but fairly recently, within the last ten years I guess? But even within a large area, say, this band of white, you can have various gradations within that and you have incursions into it, don't you.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. Those are very subtle, of course, but intended to suggest whiteness. So I didn't emphasize too much the variation of light there, but elsewhere there is a constant change; it's not flat. If pigment and color, pigment is surface but it's also color and light are a big part of the meaning of painting -- I once said "maybe 60% of painting" and a friend of mine said "let's try 80%" - and one can't neglect that. And to lay down just flat spaces is hardly taking advantage of modulations of light and color in the paintings.

I've come back again and again to Bonnard, because some of his paintings of the gardens are practically unbelievable. And I've noticed that even in Pollock, when he has poured or dripped paint in many ways in order to build network of colors, almost like a knotting of many colors together, he's trying to get that kind of a modulation of light by the use of very difficult technique. That kind of liquid paint in dripping it, it's very hard to control it and do that, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: He has in mind how light will play on pigment?

ROBERT NEUMAN: No, he has in mind creating light with color. That's what I mean by full color -- you're trying to create the sense of experiencing some quality of light in the painting, some quality of light which suggests emotional attitude or something of that sort.

I'd like to carry that a little further because I believe that we hear today, people say the neo-Duchampians, who are just by the thousands, say "painting is dead," so they produce physical things -- old dusty bottles of rubber tubing hanging out of it, and so forth. They don't paint much. But because somebody says painting is dead doesn't necessarily mean that painting is dead. People go back time and time again to paintings in museums or wherever they see them, in Europe and this country and the Orient and everywhere, they come back time and time again to see the same paintings, and they receive tremendous reward from this. You can ask them, you'll find out

that the experiencing of that work and the richness they receive doesn't seem to run out, they go back and it's renewed.

And why is that? I believe one of the base reasons for that is that the light in the painting is emotionally and in other ways also intellectually convincing to them. It isn't whether the tree is six feet or four feet high, or whether it's pine or elm, it's what the color is there. Color and the light. This is an unbelievably strong force in painting. I find that very few people paint with full palette today and I think that's a sad thing. I get more and more into it, and many people who follow my paintings say "your color is so interesting," some people say "the color is so joyous, your color is happy, we love your color" -- something of that nature.

I didn't paint much attention to it for years, I thought it was just a natural thing that came out when I mixed colors. But more now I find out that, especially after visiting Bonnard a few times, the color and light is the real base language of painting. Anything else you do to it, such as putting symbols or imagery or something else, or stylistic things are not as base as the use of color and light.

I see many paintings today in the American art scene which seem to be dead or boring because they don't use color and light very well. The real fine painters of modern times understood that. It doesn't matter which ones you want to look at -- Morandi is an example of somebody although he deals a lot with values in his painting, speaks a lot through the color and light. It's not the bottles (he laughs) that make the painting! And so it is with Matisse and Paul Klee, Bonnard and many others.

It's more and more part of my experience in painting. It's an interesting thing and very persuasive. It's also at times very discouraging, because there are few scientific or semi-scientific ways of understanding color, although certain people profess to do it. There are some volumes written about color but they end up relying on nature a lot for the proof, or they get very metaphysical, such as Paul Klee when he writes about color. I don't care what they do, I'm a maker of paint, so I use it, I exploit it and I put it down and use it any way I can -- emotionally, instinctively, intellectually, blindly - - any way; I don't care about writing any volumes about color, I like to make paintings with it.

I believe that this is an aspect of painting today that's very underrated. Some paintings of Clyfford Still's and Mark Rothko's that I used to appreciate very much some years ago I find today have become very dull because of the flatness of the color. The early Stills weren't that way but the later Stills became huge areas of flat color. After all, a large piece of colored paper is very flat too and is not what you would call creative or really aesthetic. The aesthetic depends on how the colors are used together to produce some aesthetic.

The manipulation of color and light is a big item, a very big item. Full-color painting is little done today. It has a big meaning for me. I think it's a normal and natural thing because sculpture has very little color, architecture has very little color, drawing has very little color, and so on, although in other times in history they did have color --the Egyptians colored their architecture, and so on. I think painting is the only place where the color language can stay strong and be vibrant and important.

ROBERT BROWN: This is something you're more consciously aware of in your work than you were in the past but you've always been consistently a full-color painter.

ROBERT NEUMAN: I have, almost always, except for the Black Paintings, which I actually started in Germany but made when I came back from the Fulbright and finished before I went to Spain. Those are not full-color paintings, they're different kinds of black and some metallic paints; but the rest are full-color paintings.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you suppose that was simply an aberration? Because you've said when you were in Stuttgart, you and your friend, the other American, Thomas, remarked on the sort of dull, earthy colors that the young Germans were using. You said they simply couldn't afford other pigments. Do you think you picked up a bit on that, even though you didn't work very regularly with them, you said.

ROBERT NEUMAN: No, I think there were certain artists at that time -- the French painter Schneider, Franz Kline, black and white paintings generally, other American artists, also Soulages, there were a number of others -- Tapies, others who were making black paintings. People remarked that one of the reasons was because black is not a color, so the artist after WWII in the U.S. and Europe was trying to develop a fresh, new viewpoint toward painting. So we got this avant-garde attitude and kind of a revolutionary attitude.

But it was also right after WWII, when creative and poetic people were a little bit depressed because of the second war, the tremendous disaster that took place all over the world. So I think some of the black paintings related to that, although Tapies when he made some very dark paintings like that he was thinking more in a mystical religious way. The reason there is not much color in them -- there are some spots but 95% of it is black -- I considered emotionally related to the aftermath of the war, the whole world had gone through this tremendous disaster, and to sit around and paint pansies in bright colors didn't seem to be the thing to do. A kind of reaction set in. As I said, there were many artists who were doing that.

ROBERT BROWN: When you began in San Francisco as a student, your paintings were more colorful, or colored, weren't they?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, they were, but when you leave art school and go out into the world, you sometimes have quite a variety of directions you pass through for a while. But I did make some black-and-white paintings then too; one won a prize in the San Francisco Museum, called "Apple Town" and it appeared in a big picture in the San Francisco Chronicle around 1952 or something like that, when Alfred Frankfurter was the critic, a terrific critic. I did do a few dark paintings then because I didn't really understand the difference between painting and drawing.

I believe that there are a great number of artists today who don't know the difference between drawing and painting. In other words, a painting is not a drawing. An artist I knew once said, "Drawing is supportive to painting." That's an easy way out of it -- that is true but how is it supportive? I mean, in the Renaissance they made cartoons and filled them in but that's not what I mean by painting, although the Pop artists seem to do the same thing today. When you look at Clyfford Still's paintings you don't see any cartoons being filled in. You don't see any in Van Gogh's paintings either.

ROBERT BROWN: But, say, in the Renaissance painting, you would.

ROBERT NEUMAN: You would because they laid it out -- painting was a different story then. They had commissions, and so many people had to be on the left-hand side and the right-hand side of the painting, and everything else; pigments were expensive, you didn't want to waste things, and so forth.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you feel it took you a few years after art school to sort of find your direction? Were the Black Paintings perhaps the very first that you really started singing your own song?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, I think that's the case. I was living in New Paltz, teaching at the State

University of New York, with Jules Olitski as a mentor and William Daley the ceramist and some others, Richard Frankel, and it was very isolated there culturally because it was up in the Hudson River Valley near Rip Van Winkle country. I painted in mid-winter in an old double garage with a coal stove. I used industrial paint at that time because I liked the liquidity of the pigment, I thought it was interesting what you could do with it; it reminded me somewhat of the ink paintings of the Japanese and Chinese, which are also liquid. But industrial pigment was of such poor quality it was not the best idea.

ROBERT BROWN: In fact, you did some calligraphic drawings at that time, I believe.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes I did, and a Chinese friend of mine suggested I send the photographs to Japan to Bokuzin, a famous Japanese calligraphy magazine, and they published them. It was very interesting -- the same ones I rolled up and sent to Taos, New Mexico to the Galleria Escondida, which I guess doesn't exist any more but was a hot spot gallery in a strange place in 1951 or '52. Corbett, [phon.sp.] a San Francisco artist, showed there and I admired his work a very lot. He later came back east and taught at Smith College for a while, later he died. I felt he was a very interesting artist, so I sent my drawings through this gallery because he showed there, and they accepted them for exhibition. I was very pleased with that.

A lot of people don't understand vis-a-vis contemporary American art, and it's so with European artists too, on the whole, that the abstract paintings of the real professional abstract artists, like Soulages or Pollock or Kline, that is a way of life, a way of thinking. In other words, not only is painting as they say in Europe a life work but this style, this manner of painting abstractly, is an all-pervasive thing. You'll never change.

And that's not true with the naturalistic artists. They can do different kinds of things, they drift back and forth in the various forms of naturalism. But a real contemporary abstract artist has a very firm belief in the language, in abstract visual language. If the temperature of his colors changes, the language still isn't going to change. Or, if he makes black paintings instead of full-color paintings, the language still isn't going to change. It's a constant thing. And sometimes it's very difficult, because abstractness requires abstract thinking, and abstract seeing, and abstract identification with everything. Sometimes you get yourself up against a wall because of this kind of activity and you have to take a break and think it over.

I remember reading that there were times when Picasso himself, who didn't like abstract art but whose paintings were a kind of abstraction, didn't paint for a good period of time -- a year, sometimes more. He made etchings, sometimes watercolors, or he took a vacation. When you make abstract paintings, it draws a lot out of the person who makes them. Be they good or bad painting, a human being just can't go on endlessly like that, he has to stop and as they say recharge his battery.

This is something people don't consider when they look at the paintings. The real professional abstract artist who has found a value in abstraction and abstract thinking and abstract visual language is trying to make this identification in his experience and his expression of being alive through this means. They don't understand how intense this is, that it's all-pervading and won't go away, you see. The reason I mention this is because in the art scene today there are a lot of people -- especially in the art scene -- where there's a renaissance every other Thursday, and that's an impossibility.

I remember something Nathan Oliveira wrote in a magazine a few months ago, that he couldn't stand these renaissance every few weeks because of the kind of picture

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ROBERT BROWN: (beginning mid-sentence) and years went by. Do you agree with that?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, years went by, and it takes a great deal of contemplation to make abstract paintings. Naturalistic artists say, "oh we contemplate too." They do but you can always tell if this is the locomotive of a train or a building on a hill or whatever it is. So that they have an easier time, I think, in a certain way because people when they experience these artists' work can identify things, and they identify it with their life, and so on. But abstract art takes another attitude on the part of the observer and the person who's trying to experience it.

I think of it as a more religious or spiritual attitude. That's considered very old hat today, to talk about spirituality in art, but I think Kandinsky had it right when he said he mixes a certain yellow and puts it on the canvas, he places in his mouth a lemon. That's the way I look at it also. There's an old book that's long since lost its popularity, by Roger Fry, who wrote the interesting thing about significant form in art. I believe in that too. That's why abstract art can survive, ultimately that's why, because the artist produces significant form in the painting.

People confuse that significant form in the painting with subject matter sometimes. They say, "he's able to paint the Matterhorn because that looks like the Matterhorn" or it's significant or something. But what if he's just painting with black and you don't have any Matterhorn?? Well, you have to get a significant visual form in the painting so that you can feel it when you look at it. Because you come to the painting looking for something, just as a hungry man comes to dinner and he wants something on the plate.

Between color and light, significant form is a major idea, it's an old-fashioned idea, but as someone else once said, "life is short and art is long." That's why it tells you the nature of art, the working of art -- it takes time for all this to percolate. It's so obvious if you read the writings of Kandinsky and Paul Klee and people like that, it's nothing that's fast and instantaneous, you can't have a renaissance every third Thursday. But Leo Castelli and Mary Blume and people like that have, for the money machine in New York.

ROBERT BROWN: People on the West Coast even 40 years ago thought of New York as the money machine.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh yes, because they said they felt the work they saw the artists in New York were making were shallow or imitation of the School of Paris, especially had too much Cubism in it, and they weren't going to have anything to do with that. They even talked about "the tyranny of the brush." Clyfford Still hardly ever painted with a brush for that reason; he painted with a palette knife for years because he thought the brush made the artist too facile and facility was not why you make a painting, to exhibit how facile you are. As a matter of fact, facility is sometimes the enemy of an artist when he tries to express himself. Facility is for other things -- for furniture makers and people like that.

ROBERT BROWN: What about the fact that the Realistic movement that's boomed in the 70s? That a lot of those people stuck with the same kinds of images for years after years. Is that in any way analogous to what you said about the abstract painter who --

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, when you say "Realistic" I assume you're referring to Photo-realism, Neo-realism? (Brown confirms) When that first appeared, I thought, "What are these people thinking of?"

But they proceeded to go ahead with it and various things happened. One is that they tried to make Realism that was beyond realism by having this almost neurotic intensity in the painting dealing with details, shine, polish of an original photograph or slide projected on the canvas in a certain way and traced -- we got cartoons again -- and probably the best of these was Richard Estes, who uses multiple photographs, so he does make changes.

One thing they forgot from my point of view at least: I feel that literalism is the death of art. The more literal you are, the less art there will be, the less poetry there will be, the less illusion there will be, the less color and light there will be if you're literal. And the Photo-realists became literal. This is a Chevrolet of a certain year and it's polished with wax and sitting in the back yard -- and so on. On the other hand, Richard Estes has tried to bring abstract qualities into his Photo-realism. But he suffers from literalism, because as you look at the paintings, this is stainless steel, this is glass, this is peeling bricks, or whatever it is.

I believe that literalism has very little to do with aesthetic quality and very little to do with poetry. To be literal is not to be an artist, in my opinion. I don't believe the Renaissance paintings are literal at all. Medieval paintings certainly aren't. Morandi -- there's nothing literal there. Certainly Klee and Matisse, I see nothing literal there. Even Rodin's sculpture -- I don't think it's so literal.

To carry the reasoning further, I believe literalism is a sickness that shouldn't be in the art world, because literalism leads you to materialism, and materialism leads you to physicality. Physicality is not art! A tree is a tree, it's not the painting, you have to do something with the tree. That's why you don't need literalism and materialism and physicality in art. I believe that's the worst possible thing that artists can do.

Speaking of Photo-realism, for some years I watched what they were doing because they practiced a facility very much and they used photography a lot in their paintings -- airbrushes and all sorts of things -- but it created a tremendous market in New York for this because the average American likes things to "look like it is." They see advertising and lettering, they see the curb on the street, the doorway into the delicatessen and everything in the painting. So they really produce quite a good commercial market I would say.

But I'm not interested in whether I sell paintings or not. Some years later, however, I viewed a large exhibition of Neo- and Photo-realism in New England. When I came away from that, as I was getting into my car to drive away I told someone who was with me, "Well, there you are, now you can understand: that's rendering." I spent four years getting a degree in commercial art and I know how to render fur and the texture of an orange for a Sunkist Orange ad. That's what they do -- they're into rendering very, very much. That is simply facility, it's a device.

We have a lot of this in American art today which came out of the commercial art world. Pop art has a lot of it, Thiebaud has a lot of it -- he was a commercial artist, his paintings often look like layouts, the slices of pie, caramel apples and so on. Attitudes of that kind are of no interest to me at all, because I consider art a spiritual experience. Or as the Europeans used to say, "Art is a religious activity." In this country we use the word "philosophical" instead of "religious," I guess.

Literalism is something I want nothing to do with. I could probably find a way to do that too but I'm not interested to do that. I'm more interested in being a visual poet who expresses himself with some reasonable form in his work, good aesthetic form, and hopefully something which is on a spiritual level. That's what I'm interested in.

ROBERT BROWN: The recent attempt in the last decade to make things "primitive" or childlike --



do you think, again, that's just a jumping on the bandwagon?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Such people would consider me old-hat and so on but I don't believe there is such a thing as "instant art." Some years ago there was a curator at the Guggenheim Museum, subsequently fired, who was going to have "throwaway art." They were going to make art and you'd throw it away afterwards and then you'd get some more new art and throw it away. It was art, they thought, just because they said it was, that there is nothing else except words to tell you it's art.

I think this childlike and primitive stuff you talk about relates once again to the idea of having a renaissance every other Thursday. Because if you watch these movements, they don't last very long and they're gone, and are usually done by young artists who are nervous and want instant reward for their activities. They don't have the patience to -- there are many people who consider art as a livelihood and ultimately turn away from it. And they say, "I can't stand to be in the studio by myself year after year after year. So I'll go and be a curator at a museum instead because it's more SOCIAL."

Well, these childlike and naive paintings you see and so on are usually done by young artists and rewarded by young curators who are trying to get up the ladder in museums by writing books and so on. It's not something based on years of effort or based on looking forward to years of effort in this way. Because you can see many young artists today, every two years they're practicing a completely different style, 180 degrees different. This is either facility or just plain absurd, that's all. (laughter)

ROBERT BROWN: Do you think the mass teaching of art in colleges and universities has contributed somewhat to this, in the awareness of art?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh yes, I think there are too many people studying art -- I mean, studying studio art and who think of it professionally. It should be taught in such a way -- it's difficult to say what the solution is. Some people have suggested that you should have professional studies just in art schools and not in universities and universities have a different kind of policy where you'd deal more in art understanding and maybe do some studio work to help with that, or something of this nature -- sort of a liberal arts kind of attitude.

Of course, the great financial rewards in the art world in some places today has caused a lot of people to enter the art world, too. I see young artists who when I was their age it didn't cross my mind but they're complaining about they can't make a living with their art. Well, as I just said, art is long and life is short. If you understand that then you know that making a living from your art work is practically an impossibility. These people follow whatever trend is hot, so to speak, hoping to get in on the cash flow, which was significant at certain times. I never saw much of it but some people certainly did.

ROBERT BROWN: You were always, as you said earlier, not interested in whether you sold or not.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes: the last thing in my mind is whether anybody puts money down for my paintings. I started paintings because I'm interested in them and where they're going to lead me inventively and creatively, and that leads me to some other paintings and maybe the first three are failures and finally I get something I believe in. Therein lies my reward, I trained myself that way from the very beginning.

So, I've always had to do other things, such as teach or something else, to get by financially. I still feel that way. Whether anybody buys paintings I don't have the slightest interest. Therefore I don't

promote my work much, but I find quite surprisingly and happily that people find me. They hear somehow that I had these paintings or whatever it is and they telephone me and ask if they can come and see them. So I find that rewarding, in that there are people who love art enough to do that rather than just follow the magazines and all that sort of thing and get in line and run down the track.

No, I've never been interested in whether anything would sell. I talked to a very famous artist not too long ago who was in the Neo-realist trend, a Photo-realist as a matter of fact. We were hiking on the mountain, I was standing there and somebody said to him, "Why don't you paint this view? It's unbelievable from the top of this mountain looking out over the ocean." And he said, "It wouldn't sell." So you see he was thinking of the money and so on.

That is the furthest thing from my mind. What's in my mind is the experience I have when I made the paintings -- what if I did this? Is it a ridiculous idea? It's already been done a hundred times but what if I did it also? Maybe it would be different... Because I have different experiences, I'm a different person, and I may enlarge the scale of it or lay it on heavier or do something that's going to change the aesthetic of it, and go at it that way.

I've always told students and other people who were interested, that style is to me nothing. First you make the art, then somebody comes along, hangs a name on it, then it's there's this style. We don't have a style before we start painting. But today the young artists have the style before they start painting! (both laughing) It's ridiculous.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you get to New York quite a bit, or fairly frequently?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, when I lived in New Paltz teaching at the state university there, I was only an hour and a half away and I went maybe once every two weeks and I enjoyed it because I was new in New York and I didn't know anything. I would go to Kootz Gallery and Betty Parsons and Allen Gallery and all these places. It was interesting, and New York City was a different place then, it was safer and just generally a more beautiful city. But now I have in my own person so many thoughts about painting that I don't care if I see New York or anything else, I just want to be left alone to do my own work; that's all I'm interested in.

If someone is kind enough to want to see my work, then that of course is a nice little surprise but I really don't care that much about it. And the world today is such that because of communications today, if you want your work to be seen in Paris or somewhere, with fax machines and slides you can do it so quickly that you don't have to go there in person, you don't have to travel too much. So it works out pretty well and I seldom visit New York today.

I notice a lot of artists are moving out of New York, also, for a number of reasons but they still they do move out. But living here in Boston is interesting, perhaps less so than earlier on but I wouldn't consider Boston a place, since I'm not interested in it so much anyway but I wouldn't consider it a place full of art collectors. We used to joke about Boston being "the Athens of America" and perhaps it is in terms of the universities and some fine museums, but there are a few people here who collect great art, there are collectors but there are very few important collectors here as compared to other cities.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you find years ago when you lived in San Francisco was the attitude toward art different than it is here?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, I came to San Francisco right in the heyday of the School of Pacific, by sheer coincidence, so everywhere I looked I received tremendous rewards, because I found all these

artists running around, they didn't care if they sold anything either, they were painting on anything - cardboard boxes, canvas, whatever they could find -- and there were little galleries unknown: Ubu [phon.sp.] Gallery and different ones which were never heard of again which had beautiful shows of Diebenkorn -- and nobody knew who Diebenkorn was either.

And there was a good bohemian set of people there who were really bohemians in that they had certain values about art and their life style was just a thing which was a byproduct of their values, it wasn't the reason of living that way as it is today pretty much. It was just throbbing, the San Francisco area, with creative attitudes and there was a tremendous mix sometimes of all things -- like jewelry-making and sculpture and weaving and drawing -- all strange things were mixed together because of the mental attitude of the artists. They were trying to find out if there were differences or there weren't differences in the different avenues of expressing themselves.

ROBERT BROWN: Was there awareness or an interest in the avant garde? Were people even subconsciously interested in doing something different, in advancing beyond what had been done?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh there was very much that attitude. There was very much that attitude everywhere. Lucien Labaudt Gallery was a famous gallery for the time in San Francisco, had tremendous shows, but the artists at that time, it was the most avant garde environment I've ever been in -- bar none including New York City. But the artists on the whole, nearly all of them, had tremendous respect for art even though they were way out, some of them, on the fringe.

They had tremendous respect for art, they weren't trying to destroy art, they weren't trying to do it just for tremendous monetary gain -- there was no monetary gain, everybody was pretty much starving to death and living on spaghetti. And the writers and the poets and the painters, everybody frequented one another and had a lot of intellectual discussions in these dingy little galleries in the evening. It was very exciting. I'll never forget it.

I'm not suggesting I was part of all this but I was drifting around from one place to another. I'd attend these meetings of poets' readings and painters would be there having their work around at the same time. When I went to Spain I did the same thing -- the Catalan poets would read when Franco had forbidden Catalan to be read. I went to a couple of readings when Tapies was there and certain other artists.

This kind of attitude is missing today because the younger artists are trying to QUOTE make it UNQUOTE so bad that they've lost historical perspective that even this very far-out avant garde in San Francisco never lost, they always understood that the artist, earlier on, was trying pretty hard also, and may have had some valuable ideas. Maybe equal (he laughs) to the ones we have! (both laugh)

ROBERT BROWN: They were basically a pretty tolerant lot, then, weren't they.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh, very tolerant. But they did unbelievable experimental works. But they were very serious about it. When it got to be silly they went away from it and went back to something more serious. It wasn't a sin to be serious then. I remember when David Park changed from stripe painting to figurative painting it caused tremendous furor philosophically, because Clyfford Still had such control, or left such a strong footprint there, that there were tremendous intellectual arguments going on all over the place. Then Diebenkorn started painting figurative again; and so on. The other fellow, Elmer Bischoff, started painting figures again too and made some very beautiful figure paintings.

The avant garde was not such that it was afraid to cross over boundaries and come back again, and Diebenkorn came back again to abstract painting after figurative painting; David Park never did, but they were still very avant garde all the time. It was real authentic avant garde, it was very interesting.

ROBERT BROWN: And they weren't self-consciously avant garde, is that right?

ROBERT NEUMAN: No. As a matter of fact, some of them it was very hard to visit their studios. I didn't visit much but I know other people would try to and were turned away. The studio was very private, they didn't want anybody around, they didn't want any report -- there weren't any reporters anyway but Harold [?] Frankenstein was a tremendous critic, he was really great. When I came to Boston there was a very good critic too, Dorothy Adlow, she was fantastic. Then Robert Taylor was very good also. After that we didn't seem to fare too well.

ROBERT BROWN: In the Bay Area and then when you came here in the 50s when it was so lively, there wasn't the self-consciousness among the artists or the art community generally?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, Boston was split, because of the old history of the Boston Museum School, Karl Zerbe, Aronson, Hyman Bloom and those people, the old love of the Renaissance ways and so on, and a certain kind of Expressionism -- not German, not West Coast -- but you could say it was more based on realism. There was a big split in Boston because Abstract Art was relatively new in terms of major force: there were always abstract artists around -- I think Lawrence Kupferman [phon.sp.] was one of the abstract artists here -- so there was always this antagonism and split.

Even when the galleries were doing very well and had wonderful shows one right after the other, there was this philosophical split in the art world. We didn't have that in San Francisco, because the West is a more wide open place, they're quite tolerant. If somebody's doing something that someone can't understand, they say, "well, that's his life, let him do it." But the East Coast isn't like that, there's a more hierarchical kind of setup here. Sometimes you get punished for that; like trying to find a teaching job if you didn't fit into the school, it was impossible.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it that at Mass College, you were able to get a job?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, I went there looking for a job and it turned out that the gentleman who was teaching printmaking had become the school's president and they needed someone to replace him, so he hired me and I enjoyed it very much.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, a school like Boston University, would that have been a more difficult --

ROBERT NEUMAN: I could never get a job there. I went there a couple of times -- once every ten years or so -- because they had tremendous facilities and so forth, and Mass Art when I was there was quite a poor, poverty-struck little school. I remember once arriving at BU and, having taken two steps off the elevator, my box of slides under my arm, a member of the faculty saw me and said, "What are you doing here?" It was the same as saying, "You should go away fast," because they were perpetuating the old Hyman Bloom-Zerbe attitude toward art. I don't know how that is today, I think it's weakened quite a bit. As a matter of fact, this summer I'll show with Harold Tobishu, [phon.sp.] the sculptor at Boston University. He was involved in that school quite a bit, so we have no problems at all exhibiting together this summer.

ROBERT BROWN: The did bring in there about 15 years ago the slightly younger San Francisco

artists -- James Weeks --

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, I knew Jim in San Francisco when I lived in Oakland, near Berkeley, having come there later than he did. He was a close friend of Diebenkorn and David Park and others and attended some of their meetings and the evening drawing sessions, et cetera, which they had as a small group. I was never asked into it and I didn't particularly care to be but I remember him well, and I've visited him here near Boston where he lives.

He was at that time involved pretty much in what they called "the labor school" of painting. Harry Bridges was head of the union then and they had classes at different times at night, one being art classes. I think Jim was associated in some way with that because many of his paintings dealt with working class struggle, strike-breakers, things like that. Eventually he got more into music -- jazz musicians, which David Park was also doing; Jim Weeks's brother is a musician. He's still doing many paintings of people performing at the piano and so on, but the style of his painting he still keeps related to West Coast painting. He tries to, he's a very peaceful type of person.

The major figures, such as Sam Francis, Diebenkorn, Clyfford Still and David Park, their paintings aren't very peaceful, they're quite Expressionistic, full of agitation, severe Expressionist brushstrokes, things like that. Jim practiced that for his first few years but you don't see that much in his painting any more.

ROBERT BROWN: I brought him up merely because he marked the exception at the Boston University school.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh yes, I thought so too when he came here but he was the head painter, I think, in the graduate school, which is somewhat divorced from the undergraduate program. Nonetheless he was a figurative artist absolutely and that fitted into the BU situation because their art department has no Abstract artist. The closest they ever came that I can think of, unless I'm mistaken, is the sculptor Utangi [phon. sp.] who taught there for a few years some while back. I don't know more about him except that he left, after a while, to go to Brown University. I visited their sculpture department a few years ago and it is very traditional.

INTERVIEW RESUMES: June 19, 1991

ROBERT BROWN: We were talking about your work by looking at examples. These will be in not quite random order but we'll take them as we can view them. The first one is an example of a series you called your "Rose paintings." It's almost square. When did you do this? This blue "Rose" is 1982, you say?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. I tried to extend my sensitivity in painting and one thought that crossed my mind and I considered quite a bit was the idea of painting without a shape, painting with color and light and drawing and surface but to do away with the shape itself, let the shape of the canvas be the only shape you perceive. So I called them the "Rose paintings" -- there's a black Rose, a blue Rose, a gray Rose, a yellow Rose and a white one, a flesh Rose over there.

What I did was to try to give an evocation of the flower one big image in the middle of the painting, using tactile means of surface and in impasto instead of outline. In most paintings you see the tendency to see a strong edge to everything in order to have shape in the painting. So I wanted to develop some kind of evocative painting, that was the major thought -- to evoke the quality of a flower: a blue Rose, which I don't know of any, but I used no outline and let the tactile surface -- the impasto, graffiti cut into the pigment. It catches the light in a certain way; impasto has always been

the kind of relief sculpture of the painter.

So I worked it out that way. A German artist telephoned me and asked, "What are you doing?" and I said, "I'm painting without a shape." He laughed and said, "Don't you know that's impossible?" I found out it's very hard for sure! The big black Rose over there was done about the same time, it's about six foot or more square. Each painting is restricted to one family of colors. This one's blue, for instance, Konig's blau [?] and manganese blue and different blues, which I hope, through the color and light, suggest the presence of a flower there, rather than drawing an outline and filling it in, you see. (Brown assents)

I like to draw so much anyway that I use the tubes of paint and the palette knife and my fingers and everything else to cut lines into the pigment to indicate the presence of the petals and so forth of the flower. Once again, the impasto catches the natural light in the room coming from the window or from wherever and suggests the physicality of the flower, rather than an outline, you see. So I have over there the flesh Rose, the blue Rose, and the black.

ROBERT BROWN: So to try to give a feeling of the presence of a flower as though you were very, very close upon a flower and you wouldn't be much aware of outline or shape, would you.

ROBERT NEUMAN: That's the idea. Its existence and presence is there rather than to see how wide or tall it is, which is what the shape does to it on flat canvas, you see. The only way you can do that is to be evocative about the subject -- in this case the rose, because without the edge you can only suggest it, it has to be evocative, you can't get a hard physical silhouette or the flower itself.

ROBERT BROWN: So the more or less square outside shape of the canvas is simply, what? a background, it's not supposed to be suggestive of a shape or a very important shape?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, perceptually when you look at it, because each Rose painting is one family of color -- blue, this one -- therefore what you see perceptually is a blue rectangle, that is to say the physical canvas. Then after you identify the blue rectangle, you find at some thing and that something is the evocative quality of the Rose. The actual canvas itself suggests the shape, you see; in this case it's a slightly horizontal square. So you register with the geometry of the square. But the rose has nothing to do with the square, it's very irregular and amorphous somehow. So there is this visual contrast when you think of it perceptually, between the architectonic shape of the canvas and the antithesis of that, which is the rose, you see, where one petal folds inside another and out again, and so on.

The range of light is very little, so I choose not to go into dramatic light, so consequently you don't have strong dark shadows in the flower itself, it's an abstract flower, it's evocative, and the thing that makes it interesting is the calligraphy in the incised lines of the plant, like it was wilting a little bit or something of this sort. Many artists paint flowers -- of course the famous chrysanthemums of Modigliani, the sunflowers of Van Gogh, and so on. But there is not in these even any suggestion, or very little, of stem, it's just a case of perceptually one image inside the shape of the canvas, you see. It's like a spot which is the flower and there's nothing extraneous such as leaves or stems.

So it's really Abstract formation here is what we have. I am an Abstract painter, so I think abstractly about the things when I'm getting ready to make the painting. The Rose paintings are unusual because I don't usually paint an object, vis-a-vis one thing, a rose, or a flower, so these are quite different from the other paintings; although the earlier "Pedazos del Mundo" paintings have a big circle in the middle of the canvas too. But those are very sharply prescribed shapes, while here you can't find any shape.

I found out that my friend's remark that it's very hard to paint without a shape that is quite true, and consequently after about seven or eight of these Roses, I found I could only really finish them -- the blue, the flesh, and the black Rose and the other ones I still am working on, the white Rose, the yellow Rose, I made a big red Rose too but I lost control of it technically --

ROBERT BROWN: You mean it didn't evoke what you wanted?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, you don't have a shape to go by, you have to put tremendous emphasis on the surface, you have to put tremendous emphasis on something, because you don't have a shape of the flower. So that's where the technical part gets into the act. For instance, in the black and the flesh Roses but especially in the big black Rose, there's a tremendous amount of glazing. At first it looks like a black canvas, but people who have come here and seen it, almost invariably say, "Oh, there's a lot of color in this painting," but at first glance six or eight feet away it looks black. When there's good light on it, you see there's violets and moss greens and grays and deep reds, all kinds of colors in there but they're buried in the blackness of the pigment.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you find -- were you sort of respecting the squarishness of the canvas in all of this? And yet you don't want there to be an interrelation particularly, you mentioned there's a perceptual progression: first you're aware of the squareness of the canvas, and then you get into the amorphous form. But do you find that nevertheless there's an interrelation between those two?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh, there is. The major reason is, there's only one color: in this painting many blues, and that one over there, flesh tones. Now, if this was blue and red and green or something, then the relation to the canvas would be lessened probably, because the color would get more complicated in structure. But that's not the intention here. The intention is to see just this expanse of blue, and the idea was, in my mind, to try to be as evocative as possible, because that's the only way you could make the flower without a shape, I believe. Without a hard shape of the flower -- and I didn't want to have that hard shape, I wanted to have this expanse, almost oriental-like, of blue field in which suddenly is evoked this image of something if you look at it a little while looks like the image of a flower.

It's technically difficult to do, because all through history artists relied very much on shape -- extreme shape, or less extreme, or whatever shape for definitive purposes in the painting. I was trying to avoid that here. I'm still quite interested in this and I'm going to go on with this some more. I want to make a gray Rose; I have a couple of them I've been working on. Like a lot of things, they germinate new possibilities as you work on them, so then you start another canvas -- and another and another, and pretty soon you have quite a few and don't always have so many finished.

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ROBERT BROWN: (mid-sentence) a brief period, the Rose period, but some examples you're still reworking from time to time or going back to.

ROBERT NEUMAN: That's right, and the key word in the Rose paintings is I was trying to be evocative: the evocative quality of the painting was the major concern. That is really "now you have it, now you don't have it" condition of painting, because without some kind of rigid framework to hang it in, it's very elusive; the rigid framework, if I had that, would be some kind of shape context, and I didn't want that. So it's illusionary and evocative, that's the major attitude in the paintings of the Roses, I think.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, about the same time you were trailing off on these, you embarked on something that seems like it has a literary overtone -- the series of etchings of the "ship of fools," the "ship to paradise," which were published in 1983, I believe? How did that come about? We're looking at an example from that series. They're very different from certainly the Rose paintings -- many, many shapes are suggested, a great deal of perspective, very complex in arrangement.

ROBERT NEUMAN: The "Ship to Paradise" is a graphic offshoot. I never did that before, there are no oil paintings, there never will be any oil paintings, although I was tempted a couple of times. I have drawn all my life, even as a young child, so I have this lure that's constantly hanging before me -- I'm lured to draw more. So for many years I've been a thematic artist, in that when I paint something or draw something I set it to a theme.

When you mentioned literary significance, of course we made this book of nine etchings, a handmade book at the Highloft [?] Press at Seal Harbor, Maine, on August Heckscher's printing machinery which he designed. Being involved in thematic attitudes in painting and drawing and art in general, I thought, well, as we see in modern civilization everybody's trying to get to Paradise somehow, it seems, I thought, how in the world do you do that, do you go in an Oldsmobile, how do you go, how do you get there? So I thought maybe you get there on a medieval barque. Some of this was reenforced by spending 20 summers on the coast of Maine with sailboats all around, I'm sure, and various other things that you see in the woods; such as piles of stone which look like trail markers, et cetera.

So I decided to make a graphic group of works that would be entitled "Ship to Paradise." I made 13 drawings. This is the only one that's not in the collection, the others are all in people's homes and so forth. The literary attitude is the trying to get to Paradise in this boat, and the various points and stages of progress and the problems along the way -- including the wreck, and the boat's on fire once, and different things. There's only one composition that has people in it -- there's one that's crammed full of people, they're falling overboard, and some people are referred to as modern or contemporary version of the "ship of fools," although I didn't think of it in that way at all, I just came up with the thought a ship to paradise, maybe that's how you get there, how do you get there, on a Trailways bus, or on a boat, how do you get there?

I tried to kind of paraphrase this visually by drawing. The whole thing is graphic. There are four or five lithographs and nine small aquatint-and-line etchings in the book. This one we're viewing is an unusual one because it's the last, the end journey --

ROBERT BROWN: Paradise found.

ROBERT NEUMAN: That's right. The composition is split. On the right-hand side is this vertical triangle with the boat jammed into the island, on the left and large portion of the rectangle is this structure, and there's a skeleton holding a bucket of tools, six suns in the sky -- black suns -- and the story is they found Paradise by accident by wrecking the boat on this island. And then when they got there, it turns out the time involved to get to Paradise was longer than the human life-span, therefore I put the skeleton there.

Medium-wise and technically, there's an etching plate the size of what we see on paper. I under-inked it and took just what you could call a memory [proof] on the paper in terms of the print; kind of the Renaissance way of putting a cartoon down and painting into that. Then I added new imagery which is not in the plate, so if you printed the etching plate you wouldn't have everything that you see here. There are two variations of this last scene of the "Ship to Paradise." In the other one, the drawing and coloring of the work extends beyond the margin, out in the paper. This is the last one.



ROBERT BROWN: The color here: Is that printed on or did you paint this in?

ROBERT NEUMAN: This is all mixed-media drawing on top of this very weak memory that I purposely made weak in printing on the paper. The effect of aquatint is about all I wanted, just a little guidance. The rest I did freehand. I worked for a number of years on this thing, and working on this theme and being up in New Hampshire teaching in this little college, I didn't have much space to paint in there, so I turned the little space I had into a drawing space; I made quite a few of the drawings there for the series.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, has this led to other series anything like this?

ROBERT NEUMAN: No, when it was finished that was the end of it. I was tempted at one point to make oil paintings, but I knew if I tried to make "Ship to Paradise" oil paintings it would be two years on one canvas, because this particular series tends to be highly detailed and very complicated and involved. To do that in oil paint you'd be there for years. I was tempted to do that at one point but I decided just to keep it a graphic experience from the beginning to the end.

ROBERT BROWN: This is a considerable contrast from the impasto, the glazes, the weight of the Rose series --

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. The "Ship to Paradise" is based almost entirely upon the art of drawing with a sharp pen, very fine lines, sometimes like a human hair; a fine line has nothing to do with pigment and color. I don't consider it painting, see? I consider it graphic or drawing. So the experience for the artist is totally different. And as I said, it's an idea I had about a theme but it's an unusual one because it never went into oil painting. The earlier theme I thought of when I came back from Spain, the Pedazos del Mundo, "Pieces of the World," that's also thematic but it lent itself especially to oil painting. There are drawings of those too but the drawings of the Pedazos are not as intense as these are, the "Ship to Paradise."

ROBERT BROWN: By and large, though, your drawing production is separate from your painting. Does one not particularly lead to the other?

ROBERT NEUMAN: In recent years I've separated them distinctly. I even built a studio in Maine this summer where there's no way to paint there, it's just drawings and watercolors, a paper studio. I enjoyed that. Early on when I made the Pedazos del Mundo I used to paint on an easel on canvas, and on the floor I had a couple of drawing boards with paper and I would just reach down with the oil paintbrush and draw right on the paper, which is technically not such a good idea.

So I was drawing and painting at the same moment then, but I don't do that any more because I think I've matured enough that mentally and intellectually I separate them for their own value rather than running them together. I know there's a difference between drawing and painting, I don't like to lose that, I think that difference is very important. Even though there's drawing in paintings and there's color in drawing, it doesn't mean they're the same thing.

ROBERT BROWN: In your early days out in the Bay Area, it seems to me some of your early works have qualities of drawings even though they're paintings. Is that fair to say at that time? You were later with the Pedazos del Mundo -- were you meshing the two occasionally?

ROBERT NEUMAN: That is a very interesting question. I've mulled that over very much in recent years and I spoke with some other artists. There's an artist here in New England named Jack Wolfe. I saw him one day on the street and I said, "You know, Jack, lately I've been thinking about what

does drawing have to do with painting when a drawing is a drawing and a painting is a painting?" And he said, "Well, drawing has always been supportive of painting."

And that's an interesting remark because that really is an accurate description of the role of drawing in painting. It is supportive, it's like a crutch, a cane you lean on for certain things, but when you make a drawing on paper, then a drawing is the whole thing, it's not a crutch any more, it's the soloist in the symphony or it's the whole symphony. The role of drawing in painting is important but it has to be there. And in the Rose paintings, for instance, there's a lot of drawing inside the rose -- these scratching with a knife with the tubes of paint and so on, there's complicated drawing in there. And most people miss that because they don't see a line per se, it's all the same blue, you see. But that's intended as drawing.

That difference between drawing per se on a piece of paper for its own sake and supportive-nature drawing in painting is to me a very interesting phenomenon. The paintings I made out in San Francisco and most of the artists out there were involved in that -- when to draw in painting and when not to. Because there's a time when you don't need drawing in painting. If you're worrying how red red is, there's little reason to put drawing in there.

So this is a very interesting factor in painting, and if you look at David Park and Diebenkorn, although I don't think you see it in Still, there's hardly any drawing in his paintings, but Diebenkorn and David Park treasured drawing very much in their painting but they rationed it out, so that it was supportive, just here and there did a certain important thing. Sometimes it didn't happen and they rubbed it out and tried again and so on. But when you make the drawing itself, that's a different story, because you don't have color, impasto and all the rest of it to deal with.

I love to draw, I could just spend the rest of my life drawing. I'm a little peculiar in that way because I like pens, I like to draw with pens, I have boxes and boxes of pen points from all over the world, all different kinds. I love to see pen on paper. But I love to paint more, so there is this kind of tension in my work between drawing and painting. Finding out when the drawing belongs on paper, when the drawing belongs on canvas, and how much of it on the canvas is to me a very interesting thing. There are many artists around the world who are not very professional in that they just put a black line around everything and say, "Well, that's it, I've made the painting." But if you put lines around anything, it seems to me (he laughs) you're making a drawing. (both laughing)

ROBERT BROWN: So, for example, some of Franz Kline's things might fall under that heading.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh Franz Kline is a very fine artist, but you know his use of color was very small, but very subtle. I was in the Boston Museum the other day looking at Franz Kline and at first glance it looked like black-and-white, as you got closer you saw there was umber mixed in with the black and so forth. Then late in his life, of course, he tried to bring color into his painting. In some ways he had a hard time. But I think he'd be an anomaly in this respect because more and more you look at his work in recent years, to me at least, I relate his work more to oriental art more and more than I did initially. I thought of it more as Abstract Expressionism -- direct attack on the canvas, and so forth, but now you see it as a few years past from my point of view it starts to have pretty strong oriental overtones; especially that one hanging in the Boston Museum in the 20th century gallery there, in the permanent collection.

I think that he was quite aware of this. I had a friend once in New York, an artist, Chinese-American, and he went to the Metropolitan Museum's oriental galleries more or less naturally and there stands Franz Kline looking very closely at some brushwork in some oriental silk paintings or something like that, but he was standing very close, had his nose a couple of inches away from the piece, looking

at it.

ROBERT BROWN: (after an appreciative "hmmh") Well, now, the Alhambra series, just a bit after you did the "Ship to Paradise" and there's still a strong element that looks to me like drawing. This is a drawing, itself, in colored pencil with some wash, I would say. How did that come about? You'd had the time in Spain, I think --

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. My wife and I went on our honeymoon to the Alhambra. Having lived in Spain I enjoyed it very much and I'd never been to the Alhambra. I found the Moorish architecture incredibly interesting -- the pierced walls, the slabs of glass in the walls, the pools and the plants, the light especially in the atmosphere as it got into the building, which was mostly some kind of off-white, and the colored tiles. But the play of light in the building really influenced me and I liked to go to see other examples of Moorish architecture, especially in southern Spain.

They have these columns in the Alhambra which are constantly breaking your view of this part and that part of the building. White columns that catch the light different, being round in flat walls. So I kept seeing this space interrupted by these vertical white things, these columns they'd put everywhere. They're not big, they're small columns but there are many of them. So when I came back I got into that, with these larger, planar spaces of modulated high-key light almost always, then this white void or what I saw as a column of light. And I carried that on into the oil paintings. They're not all diagonal white columns like that, some of them are perfectly vertical, but that drawing there -- I made a number of these -- and another one are particularly interesting because they're made with colored pencils and there are thousands of lines there, they're ruled.

The idea was to try to relate to the play of light on the Alhambra walls, which are white to begin with, old faded white, and the sunlight playing on that, and the patina of time and so on. In some ways I was harking back a little bit to my earlier stay in Barcelona and enjoyed the paintings very much of Antonio Tapies. Of course he's the wall painter, so I'm not without the influence from that either, but that's why there are these large flat planes like that. Compare that to the Rose paintings, there are no large flat planes there at all.

ROBERT BROWN: Why the high-key white thing most of the time on the diagonal. Is that more assertiveness or something?

ROBERT NEUMAN: No, I took it as an image, a motif. Then an artist has to do something with the motif, so I tilted it. As I said, there are a number of Alhambra paintings initially where this white void was a reinterpretation of the columns that kept dividing my view as I looked through the place. Initially they were all vertical, then finally I started tilting them to get a little more dynamic in the painting or drawing, because to any good artist the painting is the final word, the thing you're after, and the source is a source but it's not the painting, it's just there to fertilize your imagination more or less.

But that particular drawing is a very subtle drawing. There's a mixture of watercolor, graphite and colored pencils. I tried to keep it as high-key and kind of faded looking, so that you got the sense of light having bleached the walls, faded them, all this kind of thing, which is very beautiful colored light in that way. When I think of the Alhambra paintings, I often think of Nicholas De Stael [sp] and Paul Klee when they made their trips to North Africa and around the Mediterranean Basin. They responded to similar things -- to strong sunlight, what it does to things that are near-white, or things which are not dark in color; the play of light is very interesting, it's quite intense. If you're a painter, why color and light is a core experience for the painting, I think, at least 50% of the painting is based on color and light.

Then that's an interesting thing to me, because today to respond to color and light you experience in the world wherever you are, not just intellectualize it but to experience it, is a very rich and complicated experience. But when you make the paintings in this regard, one needs to have available the full palette of colors that artists have. So often today you see paintings which are so limited in colors -- one or two, that's all, there's not much mixing to take advantage of full color. That I think is not a very healthy situation.

ROBERT BROWN: When you moved from drawing, did the drawings precede the paintings or did they sort of go along at the same time?

ROBERT NEUMAN: What I do is, I make a sketch, it's not even a drawing, I probably should have started years ago making them on good paper with good ink and so on, but generally I just take a piece of paper and an old pencil and I make a schematic of the idea. Then I make the painting, and after I've made the paintings I re-investigate the paintings by making a drawing. That's how I do it.

There are a lot of artists who do that today. In another time they made elaborate sketches first and then made the paintings, but I think many artists today make a kind of a quick schematic thing in terms of composition, in terms of the major idea -- they even write words in there: "this is an ocher tint" or "a little bit of green" or something, they'll write it right on the drawing. Then they make the painting, and after they've made three or four paintings they sit down and make a really fine drawing investigating those paintings they made. I've done it for years that way. I think many artists do that today.

ROBERT BROWN: Not simply in this Alhambra series but other times too.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh yes.

ROBERT BROWN: The drawing is sort of an investigation or an analysis of the painting?

ROBERT NEUMAN: It's a re-investigation, with the intent and purpose of extracting more information than you have in the paintings; by investigating them you find, as I say, how you can squeeze a little more water of the rock that way, you see. Once again, I've drawn so much -- you don't see very many because there are a few around framed and so on, but I put drawings in portfolios that are either finished or unfinished or there's something about them I'm going to do differently. And I usually forget about them because I go on to other things.

My wife has occasionally, here in Boston or up in Maine, looks under the bed and she drags out a couple of portfolios and there's a hundred drawings there. I say, "Well, I'm going to adjust this drawing so I didn't do that" or "I'm going to make a smaller one for this, so I put it in there for a while." Well, that "for a while" was four years ago. We had a flood in the basement here one day and she went down to see what happened. Fortunately the drawing portfolios were up on a pedestal but there was a hundred more.

I've done a lot of work on paper. It's because I started as a young boy drawing so much, you see. That's all I could do, I didn't have paints or anything. I may have mentioned this before, but I had a studio in Central Square, Cambridge, and during the period of the Pedazos del Mundo I made drawings, at the same time I painted I had the drawing boards right on the floor beside the paintings. I got into drawing so much, and they were very well appreciated too, that I thought, well, I really want to paint but I keep making these drawings and it's bothering me, it's slowing down the paintings, it's frustrating a little bit.

So I said, what I'll do is kind of a simplistic idea -- I'll just draw now till I can't draw any more, I'll exhaust myself. Then I thought I could just go on and paint and wouldn't have to bother with drawing. So I started drawing and by the time I stopped, two years passed! For two years I drew. I made a lot of drawings. I made very few paintings at that time, and I'd thought it would take me possibly a couple of months and I'd be through. Two years! It was a long time. And I enjoyed it all too, very much.

ROBERT BROWN: The paintings of the Alhambra, then, many of the points you made with respect to this drawing could apply to the paintings? I mean, the of the light, the contrast --

ROBERT NEUMAN: That's true. The problem is, the drawing you see there is a small piece of paper, it's about 12" x 8" or something, and the Alhambra paintings -- it's a peculiar thing -- they're all sizeable. Maybe I was thinking of the walls of the building so I made them big. The oil paint acts differently than dry material, so I ended up having to pour the oil color quite a bit. You have to be very careful when you do that, for various reasons, so much of the Alhambra painting versus the drawings the pigment is poured on the canvas.

ROBERT BROWN: Then -- what? Spread by -- ?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Gravity sometimes. (he laughs)

ROBERT BROWN: And yet there are very crisp delineations of the different color areas.

ROBERT NEUMAN: That one that you see there, that's not poured, that's called "Torres ", "Witches Tower." In the center of the white panel is a graphite drawing scribbled in there which is intended to be the spirit of the witch in the tower. That's why technique-wise it's so different from the rest of the paintings.

ROBERT BROWN: Not typical.

ROBERT NEUMAN: No, it isn't. The pale light on the wall, the planar attitude is very strong in the Alhambra paintings because the Alhambra is nothing more than a series of planes of plaster and whatever else they're made out of it.

ROBERT BROWN: That's what particularly struck you there. What about the subdivisions, the courtyard after courtyard after courtyard there? Do you ever want to express that kind of --

ROBERT NEUMAN: When you stand and look at a painting, generally you're standing vertically, you don't lie on the floor looking at paintings, you're vertical. When I was in the Alhambra, I was standing up and what did I see? -- the walls in front of me, they're vertical. I enjoyed the spaces of the courtyards, I enjoyed that very much, how it leads from one space to another. But essentially your vision is struck by vertical things, pretty much. And although I have a couple of paintings in the studio called "Alhambra Garden." And coincidentally I could never finish them because I left -- the planar emphasis to a large extent started getting into things that looked like vegetation, it was curvilinear and I lost it, went too far. So I have to go back and try to do it again.

So I was affected by the courtyards in the gardens very much. Essentially it's planar, vertical walls and what happened there with light and perforations. I started a whole series actually on the tiles in the Alhambra. I didn't know how I was going to do that and I still don't, they're in the mill. I think of painting as a continuum, you see; it goes on and on, and I expect it to, so I don't have any rush to get this done by a certain date or that done by a certain year, whatever. So I flow back and forth. For me this is a healthy experience creatively speaking. Then, when it's all said and done and

people look at your work, if you look at some medieval artist or some other artist in the 18th or 19th century, you don't always know if other paintings were painted in between these other paintings or not, all you see is what you see, and you put them together in groups that way. So that the time-wise factor is not very active, I don't think.

I can remember going to Kootz Gallery in New York before they closed where they were showing Picasso oils, drawings, small works, and it was very interesting because I liked his tomato plant painting that he did during the occupation of Paris -- he had some tomato plants on his fire escape. So they made this exhibition and put everything together, goats' heads, whatever the subject was. But in reality he painted many different things during those years' span. But if you looked at this exhibition, you'd never know that. In reality, it was goats one day, on Wednesday day he worked on the tomato plant, went back to goats on Thursday, but you don't see that in the exhibition. It misleads people about how hard the painter works, you know. The creative process doesn't go that way.

ROBERT BROWN: And you feel you're not particularly atypical in going back to things and repeating several things.

ROBERT NEUMAN: That's right, I don't think so. This is such because the creative process as the artist can make it live depends on stimulation from the work. The psychological stimulation varies from month to month because we're human beings. In certain times certain works will stimulate you more than others. That's why some artists might make a work based on a poem, so he carries the poem around in his pocket and he keeps reading it, so he stays (laughing) stimulated to make the painting. If he didn't do that, first thing you know he'd be off painting something else. You have to keep that there if you think it's worth-while in the first place to start it, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: How did the "Lame Deer" series get going? Did that start in the mid-1980s more or less?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. This one here is 1987, this one 1990. I was out in Idaho where I originally come from and had occasion to drive around a little more than usual, so I took a trip over to Montana and revisited a place I had visited earlier, called Lame Deer. I'd driven across the country some years earlier and we were going any way the road west and we ended up in this little town called Lame Deer. So in this later visit I got interested in the landscape there; it's rolling hills, without any trees, dry grass, what they call "horse country," near the Custer battlefield.

I kept thinking Charles Russell and Frederic Remington and Bierstadt and many artists have painted things about the American heritage, so I thought here I am right in the middle of this place here, home of the Crow and Northern Cheyenne, you see it today for what it is and realize what it was historically in this country. It's something that's very important, so I thought I would try to relate to that. Charles Russell and Remington and these other people were naturalistic or realistic artists, I'm an abstract artist, so how in the world can I do that with abstract language? I'm going to try that.

So I've been doing this. I've gone back and visited it several times and it gets more interesting every time I go there. These are an attempt to obtain an abstract formulation of a piece of Americana in a sense, using the Indian tepees as symbols in the chromatic landscape, it's not a naturalistic landscape. The symbols of the tepees were chosen because of their strong structural attitude, there's no skin over them, it's just the sticks like somebody lived there once and they don't any more, they're not complete, there are many more poles than that in a tepee. Then the roughness of the earth.

It gave me a chance compositionally to split the canvas between the ethereal sky and the physical earth with rocks and chunks of clay and broken trees and everything else lying around in irregularity there, against the more smoothness of the sky. I'm a strong believer that you can't paint nothing. There are many people who don't agree with that, but I really have to paint something, and even if you're a very abstract artist, the way I've gotten around that is to symbolize something and paint that. And so the tepees become linear symbols and I use the pigment in a very liquid, flowing way to bring about the sky so you sense the sky and the sun and so forth. And then when you get to the earth it's a different matter.

These are basic elements, after all -- sky, earth, water, fire, et cetera. That's what I'm into. I don't very many abstract artists at all who have painted anything like this. They often paint Indians themselves running around in their blankets or something but this is a landscape related to the American West, a part of our history and of our country which was very active. In Europe they paint the Eiffel Tower, in Rome the Colosseum, and the Danube and everything else. So this is sort of my Danube of the West, you see.

ROBERT BROWN: The earth forms are very much outlined, it's much more complex than either the linear tepee area or perhaps the sky, although the sky does have a great many colors and richness.

ROBERT NEUMAN: This is happening because of a visual premise, that things are full or empty in the world, that there's a negative-and-positive or full-and-empty thing. It's such that when we think of the sky, generally we don't think of it as full. It seems like you can put your hand in the sky and go for miles, but if you try to put your hand in the clay earth, you can't go very far and it's full of things, like pieces of rock and gopher holes and broken twigs and rotting leaves and all kinds of things. Who knows whose footprints could have been there, you see, but there's no footprints in the sky.

That's why there's that difference. One critic said all I did with these paintings was raise and lower the horizon line. I think he must have been blind but that's what he said! You just remarked and the earth in terms of its identification and he didn't do that, you see? He said "all you did was raise and lower the horizon line," but I think that there's an attempt there to symbolize the tremendous difference between the substance of the sky and the earth, one being ethereal and the other not.

I think that sometimes in a blatant way Dubuffet, for instance, did one square inch of the earth; he made many canvases from that -- it's called "Texturology of the Earth." I had some idea like this in my mind, you see, and that's what the earth is very complicated. This one here is of smaller scale in terms of the earth but it's more into the color of light, but nonetheless there is still this activity --

ROBERT BROWN: Oh definitely.

ROBERT NEUMAN: -- all kinds of things there.

ROBERT BROWN: Now these are based on separate experiences, would you say?

ROBERT NEUMAN: No, it's based on just my association with that part of the world out there, what happened there, and I think a lot of Chief Joseph and his flight through southern Idaho and central Idaho and into Montana and to where he stopped at the Bear Paw Mountains. In that painting there, see that triangle at the bottom is intended to be Bear Paw Mountain. So the tepees relate to the theme of Lone Deer. That whole area of Montana is just fertile with history, it's really a very moving thing to think about.

ROBERT BROWN: It is, and there's an agitated quality, almost a wistful quality in my reaction to

some of the paintings, too. Nothing is particularly resolved: there's relics, ruins, some turmoil --

ROBERT NEUMAN: That's right, because I think of it in terms of contemporary society too, and when you go there today and see how it was through time, and the issue of the Indian people there, it is really very moving and it's also something never come to a conclusion, it's still drifting around in unusual ways. It's a peculiar story.

ROBERT BROWN: In this one painting where you have the triangle symbolizing Bear Paw Mountain, it seems like the sky-like element is in the lower part and the earth is in the upper [overlapping voices] very lively, inflamed sky.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. The sky there is like stars. In my space-science paintings earlier I had these large canvases with these circular forms of which there were 50, 60, 70, 80 of these little things that were intended to symbolize constellations or stars, planets, whatever; if you like up at the sky at night there are all these lights there. That was the approach in this particular painting. I darkened the sky and put the stars and so forth out there.

So the whole episode of the Lame Deer paintings relate to Nature --earth, sky, people that lived there, terrain, clouds, and so forth. I have a strong relation to nature anyway having grown up in that part of the world where there's nothing else to do but have a relation to nature -- there wasn't an art museum in the whole state or an opera or anything else, so

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ROBERT BROWN: (beginning mid-sentence) somewhat earlier about your Black paintings, which you did after you came back from your Fulbright I think, 1956 or -57?

ROBERT NEUMAN: That was during the Guggenheim, in Barcelona.

ROBERT BROWN: After you returned, I guess to Boston about 1958 or so, you began exhibiting both the Black paintings and something you called Barcelona paintings. Maybe we could look at examples here, maybe you could discuss what you were about in those, because they're certainly not black, they're rather vivid in color.

ROBERT NEUMAN: The Barcelona series I started when I returned to the U.S. and took a studio in Brookline village here near Boston. 99% of the Barcelona paintings are red, all in reds. At that time red was, still is, a favorite color of mine. I think of it as being a very strong emotional color. Most of the Barcelona paintings have a central division, which I mentioned earlier, and that one we're looking at is the last one, when it was evolving slowly into the Pedazos del Mundo or the circles, using the world for a visual symbol of the globe's circular shape.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you say at the time you were moving into something new? Or -- ?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh yes, I knew something was coming out of that, because nearly all of the Barcelona paintings have a vertical division near the center of the painting; it's a split, so it's sort of left hand versus right in the composition of the canvas. That vertical split was interesting to me because it caused the canvas on left and right to be of equal quantity. This is quite a problem when you have two shapes of almost exactly the same size. That center split became very evocative in the sense that it sometimes looked physical and sometimes it looked negative, like an empty space. It offered me a lot of potential in terms of expressing feeling vis-a-vis the left and the right side. I have no more Barcelona and Black paintings at my disposal, they're all in collections here and there;



Alan Stone in New York has quite a view of them.

ROBERT BROWN: What do you suppose led you to move away from a divided painting?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Two or three things, I think. The primary thing was the idea that it was a little too architectural, dividing a square canvas, say, right in the middle, so when you start painting you've got two verticals, two horizontals -- the physical edges of the canvas. Then you put another one in the middle, you've got three verticals, two horizontals. That's very architectonic and I'm more of a poet, I didn't want to become an architect, so I sensed it would be good to have something floating, a "floater" they call it.

Now, in the Barcelona paintings much of the articulation of the canvas is caused by taping. I would take some kind of tape and block out parts, rip it off and put some paint, another tape, and so on over and over again. This was essentially a stenciling operation --

ROBERT BROWN: For which you made preparatory studies, or not?

ROBERT NEUMAN: There were a large number of Barcelona paintings. After a while it wasn't necessary to make any such thing, although I did make little sketches like the one you see on this paper. The idea was that this graphic technique of using the tape to demarcate certain areas was interesting to me, but I wanted to escape from the architectonic of the thing after a while, it had become a little too strong an experience; because I like to express myself, not to put myself into architectural structure, which is pretty tight.

So I kept the tape and decided to float the image more, therefore I made this circular image, which I called Pedazos del Mundo, Pieces of the World, and I still used the tape and the red colors and got it out of the architectonic situation. Somebody -- Bartlett Hayes, former director of the Addison Gallery of American Art, reviewed the Pedazos del Mundo show and wrote QUOTE the thing in-ness of the painting, that there's something inside the circle and something outside the circle, that's the perceptual phenomenon you get when you look at the painting. But the conceptual idea for me was the part that the world as a symbol -- and once again I used the world as an abstract symbol to paint with -- the world is in pieces, I thought, in terms of liquid, solid, gases, language, cultures, continents, in all different ways the world is in pieces.

So I thought this was an interesting thing to try to express, because it seems to be the truth. And I always try to paint some thing, as I said earlier, and I thought everyone can relate to the idea of the world, because we're standing on it. So I'll make this circular image of the world. It's an abstract image, it's a symbol, it allows me to participate with the tape painting quite a good deal, and at the same time it's something that people can relate to because everybody knows about the world.

So I dealt with it that way, it's an imaginative concept but an interesting one, I think. Many people complained about the pieces outside of the world floating around space and it carried on into these traditional paintings over there where the world is still there but other things are appearing. My answer was that some of the parts of the world are loose from other parts, they've broken loose --

ROBERT BROWN: Did that satisfy them

ROBERT NEUMAN: Some people didn't like that very much, they tend to be more purist, more like Albers disciples or something like that.

ROBERT BROWN: These were coming along in the early 1960s.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, that's true.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you think that was a time when the hard-edge was coming along in some aspects?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, I don't know if it was exactly here yet. Yes, they were more purist-inclined, hard-edge is a pretty pure thing. But in that Pedazos del Mundo thing there, I used a different kind of paper, medical paper which has pores in it and the paint goes through the tape and does certain things which another kind, say masking or some other kind, wouldn't allow. So you can actually paint right through the tape.

ROBERT BROWN: Through this time, tape was the prime tool that you used.

ROBERT NEUMAN: I found it to be very interesting because it allowed unusual shapes and structures, according to whether you tore the tape or cut it out with a knife or scissors or what you did, and you could use it over and over again. I have some Pedazos del Mundo -- there's one over there in the stack -- where I saved the tape from a painting and put it on another canvas, so the Pedazos image in the painting is collaged out of tape removed from other canvases; sort of like recycling the tape. Of course that's an oil collage, an unusual kind of collage. But you had to cement it all down. [They walk away from tape and move paintings around.]

ROBERT BROWN: Well, there's a sort of brittleness about ones that are painting using the tape, but nothing compared to the collage effect of this one.

ROBERT NEUMAN: I think probably the thing that led me to it was that when you used the tape in a regular painting and then removed it, it had pigment from the painting smeared on it of one color or another, another tape from somewhere else had another color on it; plus the tape color itself. And then, when you compose those in a certain way, that's why they call it collage, I guess, you find the colors you need rather than making them with the brush on a palette. There are a couple like this, then there are a couple done with paper collage made from labels off of canned goods, things like that.

ROBERT BROWN: This one is brittle and it's very forceful but the colors are more subdued than they are in the one that's purely oil paint.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. That's because of the tape, which absorbs the color, and the tape itself some of it is red, and ivory, different colors, more subdued.

ROBERT BROWN: What about the horizon line or whatever it is at the bottom, below which background paint has been dripped, flowed down?

ROBERT NEUMAN: That is an attempt to get a sense that the thing is floating, you see. We think of something -- a planet in the sky or the moon or cloud or whatever it is -- as floating, and it's enhanced when we see the horizon or something to do with the earth below, or something below that it's floating away from. So you get that sense of floating.

That was quite a break in my painting when this happened, because as I say the Barcelona paintings had a certain architectural suggestion to them and they actually came from architecture, because I was looking at these tiny streets where the light filtered through between the buildings, it came out of architectural context. And now Pedazos del Mundo is a broader theme, it's a symbol of the world floating there, and everybody is concerned about the world, and so on.

ROBERT BROWN: Back to the Barcelona paintings, you've mentioned before that great shafts of light would come down the center of the street, and to left and right were other things.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, in these Pedazos del Mundo, were there any political overtones at the time -- concern about --

ROBERT NEUMAN: No.

ROBERT BROWN: -- the divisions, and the fragmentation, and the variety --

ROBERT NEUMAN: No. I don't believe in political art. I believe it will degenerate sooner or later, usually sooner, to propaganda of one form or another, and probably one of the worst paintings Picasso ever made was the one about germ warfare in Korea; which was probably true, and at the same time artists find when they do propaganda things, their mind gets into the propaganda instead of the qualities of art. So the tendency is that you cease to have art, or have very little of it. On top of that, art that deals with propaganda sooner or later begins to look posterous also. Today there seems to be a lot of political things in galleries that I have no interest in whatever.

I made one painting in my life which had political overtones, when I lived in San Francisco, just out of art school. The Korean war had ended and I made a painting called "Terrible War Machine" and sent it to an exhibition -- David Park was on the jury -- and it took first prize for a Pacific Coast painting, in Walnut Creek, California, a Bay Area suburb. The strange thing about that, to expand on my feeling about this, is that the painting was dripped and poured on from cans and things on a sheet of Masonite, so that you couldn't see any machine, it was colors going all over the place; but the title was all the newspaper critics could talk about, they couldn't talk about the painting very much they were so concerned with the title. I don't think it's the task of artists to do that.

ROBERT BROWN: You certainly weren't attempting to here in this series that evolved.

ROBERT NEUMAN: No.

ROBERT BROWN: You continued on, then, this series for a couple of years in the early 60s. These were shown fairly widely, I guess.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. The Pedazos del Mundo were quite well received critically and in exhibitions, they were put in many exhibitions; but very few went into collections. Unusual; the Barcelona paintings went into collections rapidly -- not that I think a lot about that but now that I look back, that's what happened. So I have a lot of Pedazos paintings left. There are a few in collections but not too many.

ROBERT BROWN: I note that Pace Gallery before it went from Boston to New York, had an exhibition in '62, and then in '63 you had your first New York show at Allan Stone, of most of these paintings.

ROBERT NEUMAN: That's right. New York not being into any collection or anything, the show in Boston at Pace was well received but I had a number of drawings of the Pedazos del Mundo with the oil paintings and the drawings disappeared very fast into collections. Perhaps the price range -- in those days they were very inexpensive -- but still they took the drawings. Sometimes it has to do with the size of things, too; the Pedazos del Mundo, many of them, are about five feet or more.

ROBERT BROWN: More square --

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. There's a very nice blue Pedazos del Mundo up on Beacon Hill in the home of Lewis/Louis Cane/Cave (phon.sp.). He's had it for some years, I just cleaned and varnished it the other day, it looks very nice.

ROBERT BROWN: You also created some additional lithographs of the Pedazos series. What was with that?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, those were very interesting things for me. When I was living in California I researched and studied lithography to a good extent; I didn't know everything but I knew quite a bit about it. Then I didn't have the opportunity to make any lithographs until I came to Boston. At that time, George Lockwood started a lithography workshop in Boston for artists and that was something that never happened here before. It was just the very beginning of all these print workshops, such as Tamarind and others. Well, in Boston as usual we didn't have anything, so he decided to sacrifice everything he had financially and everything else to start one; he had a family with several children and no other job and he started this. I went there and printed 11 editions there. I had a wonderful time doing it, so there are 11 editions of Pedazos del Mundo. I would say maybe only half a dozen are in collections. I don't spend as much time exhibiting them as I do the paintings, perhaps that's one reason why --

ROBERT BROWN: These are color lithographs?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. There were one or two one-color lithographs but most of them were two-color. I didn't make any lithographs after that -- I showed all 11 editions at the Pace Gallery in Boston. Not many were taken by collectors, so being of limited resources I put them into the paintings. So I didn't do a lot more lithography until the Ship to Paradise when I made four more lithographs, one of which has about 13 colors in it.

ROBERT BROWN: About 20 years later.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. You see, to the artist, making lithographs and making ink drawings with a brush and pen are very similar. It's just that you can't print one of them. So since there wasn't much following for the lithographs, and it's expensive, I decided to make drawings instead. I would like to make more lithographs today of the Lame Deer, I've never made one. I started an etching but the expense of it is prohibitive, it's pretty expensive to print. Most artists today commission someone to underwrite the expense, then they split the prints. They print 100 or 200 and each person gets 100.

ROBERT BROWN: What was George Lockwood like? Did you get to know him pretty well?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, I got to know him very well. I was teaching lithography at the Massachusetts College at the time, so he had some respect for me. Then he had a Tamarind printer as an assistant, Herb Fox, who now has his own place around here. But George loved printing -- he's essentially a woodcut and wood engraving artist, and he liked to make small books. Some of these have become quite sought-after collectors' items these days. He's very involved in poetry. He's a typical and proper printer; a woodcut and wood engraving handmade artists' books person.

He understood lithography, so he was happy to see me come; he needed the money and I had a little bit from selling paintings, which I put into the lithographs. And if they didn't sell, I have the lithographs! (he laughs) He treated me very good. A lot of people who printed weren't professionals,

so there was a need to oversee them. Often they would just give me the key and say, "Come whenever you want to."

ROBERT BROWN: For a good many of the others, the workshop had to do the actual printing.

ROBERT NEUMAN: They were always asking how to do this, how to do that, and they would do things you couldn't print. Lockwood knew that I'd made lithographs for 10 years or so and was somebody you could trust in the shop.

ROBERT BROWN: These Pedazos del Mundo that you stuck with into the mid-60s or so.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And then you began concentrating, as it were, on what lay outside the globe or circular form, right?

ROBERT NEUMAN: In the field.

ROBERT BROWN: What was out in the field? This was all eventually what you call your "space sign" paintings.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, I made maybe 35 or so Pedazos del Mundo oil paintings, but eventually that single bull's eye there against a field I felt had been exploited about as far as I could go and something had to give. So what I did was take these little units and symbols floating around the main image in the Pedazos del Mundo compositions and give them more importance. The main circular form got reduced and eventually disappeared altogether, and there are larger canvases with 35, 40, 50 elements, small circles and other shapes, in some kind of a loose grid like arrangement across the field. I think of them as constellations and they're called Space Sign paintings. It's something like a Milky Way in the sky, only it's in oil paint and as a symbol, instead of one circle. I've said often that when you look at a Space Sign painting, instead of looking at one Pedazos del Mundo it's like looking at 30 at once because each one is a unique composition and none of them are repetitive.

ROBERT BROWN: And each one within itself has a good deal of activity or -

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. They become quite optical because in some of them, the big Space Sign paintings, the circular images, the little planetary images are arranged in certain lines a little bit grid like so they pop, optically, once in a while. Not that one there but the one where the big central image has disappeared.

ROBERT BROWN: They seem to almost pop, you say?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, they're quite optical, your eye has trouble staying on one, it jumps to another -- one at the bottom, up to the center, to one at the right -- so that it articulates optically. It's quite interesting. I was very interested in opticality in art in general, not just in paintings, and when I taught at Harvard we had several people there who were into how we see things. Their perceptual psychologist, Rudolph Arnheim, got into that quite a bit. I was affected by this and found it interesting.

ROBERT BROWN: Did he discuss these things quite a bit with you?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh he was free to talk about anything but he had a rather orthodox way of

looking at it, I would say, sort of pseudo-scientific. I heard that perceptual psychologists consider him somewhat apart from their field, but he did write some very interesting books about perception in art.

ROBERT BROWN: You still use tape, don't you, in your painting --

ROBERT NEUMAN: It's an interesting device.

ROBERT BROWN: I should have asked earlier about the use of the tape: that means you only do certain areas, certain areas you can't get to until you remove the tape. Does this mean the process of creating the whole painting becomes a little difficult, hard to conceptualize? As you could with a brush or a palette knife, you could apply all over here and there.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, it meant you had to think more compositionally and it shows. Some people don't like that, they say it forces the composition too much. But I think that thinking about opticality and visual order was a thing that I was involved in very much -- opticality and visual order in a big sense whether it's architecture, painting, sculpture, city planning. In everything visual order was a reality. And it's a very interesting idea -- what it does to our lives, whether we live in visual order or visual disorder and so on.

You could have that in art too, you had to have it. When you look at ancient paintings, they were very careful about how they ordered things. People often refer to that as "composition" but it is a certain kind of order the artist assembles to a painting's expression. Using the tape doesn't mean, as you suggested, that you only put one layer, you can make many layers. It depends how you use it. When the pigment is wet, you can lay it in the wet there, and with dry paint you can wash it out with turpentine and rags. You can do many things, it's quite an expansive thing. You have to be careful, however, that you don't get what you could call "tape-itis" -- you run a good thing in the ground. So I use tape much more sparingly now.

ROBERT BROWN: But you combine it with freely painted areas --

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh yes. I don't want to get rigid with the thing.

ROBERT BROWN: -- and you mentioned to me earlier that you press onto it, you push paint on a circular form or an oblong form, you stamp --

ROBERT NEUMAN: Many people use stamped images but it became a trick, generally, and over-obvious device. I didn't want it to be that, so for many years I've investigated this and I found that stamping and pressing and dissolving, blotting -- there are ways you can do this where it doesn't look so graphic. It's a little more in the painterly tradition.

ROBERT BROWN: The painterly tradition matters a great deal to you, doesn't it?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, because if you get overly graphic, the painting will get very flat. There has to be a way to get beyond that. The total image, the total experience of the painting is the most important thing; the totality of it. I often told students that a painting is an object, it's not a picture (a "pik-chah," as they say around here). So I say the painting is an object: it's so wide, it's so high, and whatever is inside that proportion definition, that is the object. You appreciate the painting from edge to edge, it isn't just a shape of a vase or an apple within the painting that you appreciate, it's the whole thing.

This is even emphasized more so by many artists today who paint the edge of the painting, they're

sometimes called "painters of the edge." They have very little in the canvas's interior area and they put everything out on the edges. They're also emphasizing that the shape of the canvas is the painting, the whole canvas, every square inch, and no one part is more important than another. If you think physically, you don't think that way and say that this is a pine tree I'm painting here, what I paint is the symbol, the most important thing, it's the image, the motif, whatever it is. Like "Motif Number One in Gloucester." I don't want to approach it that way.

That's another reason why the Pedazos del Mundo circles led into Space Sign paintings eventually. That center spot got very strong. I thought I'd made the statement, so I wanted to take away the importance of the center, so I began to put these other small circular images elsewhere, to draw the eye out from it, you see.

ROBERT BROWN: In your Pedazos del Mundo themselves, the forms that are outside the circle are quite amorphous, whereas in the Space Signs, most of the shapes are clearly shaped.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. Well, I thought of them as pieces, you see -- pieces that had escaped from the world somehow. That the world is a big globe, a semi-round thing spinning around; that there are things outside of the world, things out in space. There are different constellations -- stars, moon, sun, all kinds of things, and it's as though things, maybe the world, gets so intense, it's almost like things break away from it somehow. Also, our lives are so packed with things you sometimes think that some of those things escape too.

ROBERT BROWN: So in the Space Signs, you took hold of things in space but you gave most of those forms more definition than the "pieces" in the Pedazos series.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh yes, definitely. The idea was to slowly get rid of the central image. But I had to figure out how to order it, so I put it in grid -- the big ones are in kind of a grid but it's an informal grid.

ROBERT BROWN: But then were very vivid. Crisp shapes by and large, circles and the like.

ROBERT NEUMAN: As a matter of fact, some people -- I remember Henry Ford, II called my house in Maine and wanted to look at some paintings. I'd never met him before and he said, "Are you the painter of the circles??" He didn't know me personally but that's how he identified me on the telephone. I said, "Yes." The thing with circular images on the canvas is that, as Bartlett Hayes said, "the thing-inness," the thing inside the circle and the something-else outside the circles. Then there's another circle, something in there, and then outside and inside the next one.

So pretty soon you're very conscious of the presence of these elements floating in the space, and on the other hand the space around them, and pretty soon the space around them becomes important almost like it is something too. So there's a play there between positive and negative -- which is negative and which is positive. Because some of these forms you see in the paintings have the same color inside as outside, you see; it looks like the spaces inside. It's a play with the sense of full and empty or positive and negative things.

ROBERT BROWN: They're very lively, aren't they? Very, very active.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, they're floaters, you see, they're floating in space. The Rose paintings have a little bit of that, but they fill the canvas so much that the outside space is much smaller than in these.

ROBERT BROWN: The forms are much more dominant, compared to these. When did you start

going to Maine? In the mid-60s or so?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, I guess so. I used to go to Ogunquit for a few summers but it got so expensive I couldn't afford to go there. Then Allan Stone, who was my New York dealer then, offered me an old house up there in exchange for some paintings, so I went up there, repaired it, and did some oil paintings there. That thing was painted in Mrs. Smart's garage in Ogunquit. She was very active in the Barn Gallery there --

ROBERT BROWN: Yes: Mary Lee Smart.

ROBERT NEUMAN: I didn't have any place to paint, so she said, "Use my garage."

ROBERT BROWN: The influence of Maine is somewhat on you. You've said that in this next stage, which are these piles or monuments, no one in particular, they're given various names, which are very tightly arranged more or less up the center forms; by and large, pretty defined forms. Quite a graphic view.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. This one is not typical but this is more the idea. It's a stacking of these stampings; circular, rectangular, elliptical, et cetera, one on top of the other, as a pile of things: like a pile of trash in contemporary culture, they pile one thing on top of another, they, whether it's the government or the people, never seem to throw anything away. These trail markers made me think of that also, where they pile stones up to show this is where the trail turns, they pile those stones on top of . But I thought, in so doing they would be continuous and look like they could fall down if somebody pulled out one piece the whole thing would come down. I call some of them "monuments" and no one particular. There's one called "The Monument to No One in Particular," "Homage to Ira Hayes" --

ROBERT BROWN: Ira Hayes?

ROBERT NEUMAN: He was a Pima Indian who was one of the people perpetuated in bronze in Washington of the four Marines, the monument to Iwo Jima in WWII. I have gouache sketches on paper of the piles and stacks, and I started giving them names -- "this monument to be constructed at the Boston Airport" "this one should be at the UN Building" and so on. Strictly the imaginary thing, but I did make these monumental piles almost like drawings of sculpture, they're statuesque in a certain way.

That was a kind of interesting thing, because when you paint you don't have anything physical to hang onto, and when you think of a pile or a stack of things, whatever they are, you have a relationship established to something physical. To pile up something means there's something physical on top of another thing. A critic wrote a review in a Cambridge of a show I had in a little gallery, still there today on Church Street, showing a number of these drawings of the stack and the pile, and the female critic wrote something to the effect under the headline "contemporary piles of junk" being exhibited at such-and-such a gallery. (he laughs) It was a complimentary review, but she could see the idea too.

ROBERT BROWN: But it's not necessarily junk, not necessarily a trailmarker --

ROBERT NEUMAN: No, it's not a literal thing. The association is there but it's not literal, I don't believe in literal ideas --

ROBERT BROWN: But it's only a "monument" in the sense that it's piling up --



ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, that it's statuesque; sure. I thought that there were so many monuments. Another level of this was that everywhere you go you see a monument to various people -- President Grant, or somebody who invented something, or Lindbergh. I thought maybe we should have some monuments to somebody who was not so famous, just ordinary monuments. We see that there are such monuments in other cultures -- in Indian cultures and other early cultures. They weren't to particular people, they were to other things; even Easter Island or whatever. There are African totems and things like this, too. These are totemesque.

ROBERT BROWN: These were all done when in your studio in Brookline?

ROBERT NEUMAN: No, I started these in my studio on Moody Street in Waltham in the mid-70s. I worked on them in New Hampshire, then I think here also. But the opticality of those transitional Space Sign things is still here. See the black circle on the white there that's very optical because of the extreme opposites of black and white, and the size changes; it's not complete yet, there are a number of these around. Mrs. Walter Ford of Detroit owns a number of these, she has three or four Monuments, to no one in particular, for [?] the staff.

ROBERT BROWN: The one on the right that isn't finished does look much more -- well, the painting, whereas the other one we're looking at has a good deal of three-dimensionality in --

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, it has a lot of chromatic drawing there, you see. The line is blue and green and gray and purple and so on, so that when the line changes color it looks as though it's near or further to you. So there's a suggestion of dimensionality.

ROBERT BROWN: And a suggestion of girder, construction, support.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, all kinds of things.

ROBERT BROWN: But that's not typical, really.

ROBERT NEUMAN: One drives around America and you pass some vacant lot and there's a huge piece of a car lying out there rusting or some bedsprings, there's all kinds of things lying around, we have trash all over the country. It's like people leave these deposits behind as souvenirs of life. They almost become monuments as you drive by. You see out there in the lot a rusty Pontiac sitting there. It's like a monument too, maybe more acute to contemporary society than one to President Grant, say.

ROBERT BROWN: We discussed the other places of your painting but you're working essentially, and re-working, on almost every phase, aren't you, here in your studio here in St.....? What determines what you'll pick up next? Now you're predominantly working on the Lame Deer series; the most freshly painted one here on the floor is of that series. But you, on the other hand, mentioned that you go back to Barcelona paintings, you have more Pedazos del Mundo --

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, I don't make any of those any more, those are finished, and the Ship to Paradise is all though too although I might make another drawing or two; I have many drawings of Ship to Paradise that were never finished. I had one where I was looking at clouds in a Michelangelo drawing and I took the shapes of those clouds and I was going to turn that into something of the Ship to Paradise.

But you see, art to me is a continuum and it goes on and renews itself but it has to renew itself some place and it doesn't come out of the sky as a gift. So I look back at earlier things and think what I was thinking then and how it looks now in terms of whether it's the same message. Very

often there's new dimensions there that I wasn't as acutely aware of as I would be today. So I sometimes find the older paintings will affect the newer ones.

Then there are things I'm glad I'm done with and I'm not going to get involved in that again, because I've suggested it and gone on to something else more meaningful. But I believe in a linkage between the paintings, you see. Perhaps the healthiest linkage is that which occurs as you work rather than trying to intellectualize it, but I still am in the process of intellectualizing. I'm not sure that's a healthy thing but anyhow I still do some of it.

I'm sometimes surprised when I visit other artists, they don't seem to go back to their old paintings and look at them. But I know that many fine artists did that -- certainly Picasso went backwards as much as he did forwards for resources and stimulation. I do something similar to that and I like to see how I've changed. Sometimes if you can see you've actually changed it develops incredibly rewarding [sic] because there are a lot of artists, I think, who really don't grow or change much, and I think if an artist does not grow through time he isn't much of an artist.

I sometimes have this banal description of this situation. I say, if you were a hunter going to go duck-hunting, say, and you've had a doublebarreld shotgun whereas somebody else takes just a singlebarrel shotgun, and both shoot at the duck and they don't hit it, it flies away, the person with two barrels has a second shot. That's the way I look at painting. There are many artists today who only have one shot in their gun, they shoot that and it's all over with. But can you imagine it being all over with someone like Matisse or Picasso? It's never over, it was constantly

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ROBERT BROWN: (beginning mid-sentence) painting for you is just in this ability to rework or re- ---

ROBERT NEUMAN: To figure ideas, and the only way to do that is, you can't just draw on yourself all the time, you have to draw out of what you make. But when you grow through time, it is natural and normal, I believe, it isn't a straight line as you develop through the years, you're going to wander far off to the right and it'll be very fertile, then you'll go back to the left again, and toward the center, and continue on in this line of creating your work. There'll be times when you'll go out to the left or the right and you'll get to a dead end and you'll have to stumble back to where you were before. But you have to go to those places, otherwise you don't know whether what you're doing has significance or is the right thing to do.

Now, there are very few people who do that today; very few in my opinion. An awful lot of artists today, especially younger artists, set up a certain attitude and they just follow that. They really don't go out on a limb and fall down and get up again and try it all over again like they should. That's costly, it takes time and a lot of discouraging moments, but you still have to do that. Even if you look at the circus performers and carnival people of Picasso, some of them are immensely fine works and others look to me pretty rough. He didn't know himself how to do it, you know? But he was trying to do it, and that's the only way you can really get to a high level of expression, I think.

In that painting there on the easel of the double Lane Deer, it's called "Little Shell," there are two images on the earth: you see that thing there that looks like a comb, and there's an ovoid shape with a green stick sticking out of it: those are two drawings I saw in a cave in Montana that were put there maybe 5,000 years ago. As soon as I came back to Boston and got off the airplane, I drove over here and put it right in the painting. I saw these cave drawings of the pre-Indians -- I forget their name [transcriber's note: he means the Anasazi] -- and there's a cave outside Billings

that's full of their drawings that they say were pre-Moses or of the time of the Pyramids.

ROBERT BROWN: That's a good example that you rushed back and you add something unexpectedly.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, I just put it right in -- oh, I believe in direct and fresh attack to the painting but I also believe in thinking about it before you do it. Sometimes one can over-think paintings, you need to live it as you paint it, but the fact remains that the great masterpieces of the world, when you look at them, they don't lack organization and order. If you look at the great Spanish realism, boy, they really as you say "knew what they were doing." But that means they had control of it, too.

Today I think that direct fresh painting is very important. There are different ways of approaching that but I think what they once called "action painting" is a very strong thing but without understanding what you're trying to do, something pretty clear, its chances of meaning much are small.

ROBERT BROWN: You've stuck consistently with a very abstract manner of expression but that doesn't mean it's just done unthinkingly.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh no, no, no. I believe that abstract language is the language of our time. Then if is the language, you should be able to speak it. I was reading a magazine review of an Ad Reinhardt show at MOMA now and the reviewer quoted some art scholar who said that abstract painting is a time bomb. That's what I believe it is, too. People don't realize how dominant it is and how pervasive. Because every time you go to an exhibition, I don't care whose it is --photo- realism or geometric art or whatever -- they always put some abstract paintings at the beginning near the door to legitimize the experience. What if they didn't put those there? Then what would we see? (he laughs)

I thought that was an interesting expression, his describing it as a time bomb, because I believe that as time goes on there will be tremendous reinvestigation of abstract painting or abstract art. There's too much interpretation of it as a kind of architecture and design, which it isn't -- a good abstract painting is just as personal as any other kind of painting, you certainly don't look at Jackson Pollock or Franz Kline as a painter of architecture and design (laughing heartily) but it's amazing how many people come to that conclusion.

ROBERT BROWN: It sounds as though have a compulsion to go on as long as you can; you see no end --

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh I'll make abstract paintings forever. The symbols will change, and the human attitude in the painting will change, but it will always be abstract. Because I don't see anything that would become more important to me. We've had so many movements in the last whatever-it-is, 15 or 20 years, say, and they all last about four years, then there's something else. There's "neo", "geo," conceptualism, minimalism -- none of them last very long. Abstract art has lasted whatever it was, 25 years or something, but that was as a trend, that was just getting it introduced and it being received by the society in various ways. But that doesn't mean that they understand it really, you now.

I think that some abstract art that was considered very important will become less important, and some that was less will become more. I find that true in terms of my own feelings when I see paintings by certain artists whom I once admired a great deal and some of their art to me becomes far less significant now, whereas other people become more alive for me.

ROBERT BROWN: Can you give an example?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, I used to be a great admirer of Clyfford Still and I've become much less so. Wolfgang Wols is a lesser known abstract artist in Paris, a photographer by trade, his paintings are very small, very humble, but every time I look at them they look more interesting, they don't "wear out," they don't "run dry." Now I see other people are starting to see that too and starting to write books about him and so on. He wasn't so recognized by a large body of people when he was painting when the trend was in vogue, but now he's come up more.

There are lots of people like that. Yesterday I saw a little Pollock drawing at someone's house, it was unbelievable. His drawings are so different from his paintings. And of course there are different periods of his drawings. I like very much the totemic drawings he made; he did some oil paintings like that too. There's a large horizontal one in the San Francisco museum, I think it's called "The Priest/Feast" [?]

I think "abstract art" is such a large denominator that it takes years and years and years to evaluate it, not to mention the trends and political considerations of the museums and the writers and all that, but there's going to come a day when there's a tremendous amount of research into abstract art, I'm sure. Just as that critic said, it's a time bomb. That's quite interesting to me.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean its biggest day lies ahead, the time bomb waiting to go off.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, its significant in American culture, and then in international culture. [Brown agrees] It's not just another trend that lasts just four years, it's something else.

ROBERT BROWN: This must sort of reaffirm your own determination.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh yes, it does. I've had many collectors and artists indicate that they consider abstract art "passe" and so on, and it doesn't bother me at all. I know that there are highs and lows in the cultural civilization; regardless of what style art exists there are highs and lows. But I don't have the feeling that abstract art has seen its day. Some of the great masterpieces have been made, but it seems to be a very vital thing, as I indicated with these exhibitions that you go to.

I went to a photo-realist exhibition in a museum near Boston and the first thing they did they had some drawings by people who were essentially abstract artists - very abstract in their attitudes, like David Park and others, but he didn't have anything to do with photo-realism. (he laughs) They use it to justify thing because they know it's a big number.

ROBERT BROWN: You're saying that Abstraction is the major core in contemporary art.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh yes, it's the major core, it's the major language, it's the heartbeat of it all. Maybe some people understand it but I think many people don't comprehend that, they think it's just another trend, but it was a pretty potent "trend" for 25 years there.

ROBERT BROWN: Most important to you, it seems, is to be painting, to be thinking and re-working and refining. You don't care too much about the exposure your work gets. Is that fair to say?

ROBERT NEUMAN: I dreamed myself when I was starting out, somehow I said, "I'm going to paint what I want to paint and whether anyone acquires them or whatever, I couldn't care. It would be nice but I'm not going to worry about that, because I see too many artists that paint for money. I don't do that." So I taught and did other things in order to get by, to live and pay my way. Therefore I was free to paint what I wanted.

This allows me a certain individuality and I believe that the great artists of the world were very strong individuals and it shows in their work. But commercially, today, the galleries like things of the same ilk for commercial reasons. So I have a hard time with painting galleries but I've managed to do all right as I went along. That has been a problem. I mean, a museum director said, "Robert Neuman is going to have a hard time because he's individual and the dealers like people to follow a certain mode that's lucrative and if you don't, they won't deal with you." That's what he said and I think it's quite true.

With reference to this idea, I've often experienced collectors or people who enjoy art come to my home or a place where my work is, and I look at their face and the first thing is their eyes pop open because it's out of the mainstream, it's abstract but it's individual and they don't see it very often. After a while they say, "I like it very much," you know? But they're afraid, because most of them are investors, they're investing to resell it, and they're afraid, because they believe the same way the dealers do. That's really not a very wise idea.

ROBERT BROWN: You've had one man handle your paintings for years, Allan Stone, and he regularly purchased them --

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: -- is he an exception to this observation?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, he doesn't show the work very often, because he found out also that they didn't sell in New York. As he puts it, "They're jaded, the New Yorkers, they see certain things and they think that's what you should have and anything that doesn't fit that mold, they don't want to touch it." He remarked at a get-together one evening recently that he'd talked with some people from Florida and he said, "You know, I buy his paintings even when I don't want to." So it's pretty interesting. He hangs them around his house or puts them away in one of his several storerooms where he keeps paintings and sculptures. I thought that remark was pretty interesting, I'd never heard a dealer say that before -- "I buy them even when I don't want to."

ROBERT BROWN: You feel you have accomplished and are continuing to accomplish pretty much what you set out to do a great many years ago?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, I have. But I believe that, as they say, "art is long and life is short" and that the nature of art is deep, very deep. To accomplish something you have to keep chasing it as long as you can. That's what the Europeans say -- "art is a life work." That's definitely the truth. While I finished certain periods -- Pedazos del Mundo, Space Signs, the Barcelona paintings, various things that I don't do any more, I think of them in an older view that it's part of what I'm doing now, it's still being extended into time. I have in my memory what's in the earlier paintings, and I've tried to bring some of that I consider vital to the new paintings.

I believe art is humanistic in its essence and it should stay that way however it's presented by the artist. I don't believe at all in art being just decoration. I think most great art we see in the world is humanistic in some dimension, the artist has found a way to do that. There's various ways, sometimes more obvious, sometimes more hidden, and so forth, but it's still there. This seems to be little in people's minds today either, it's more what you say: political things.

ROBERT BROWN: By humanistic you mean things that will be of importance to art business?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, again to look at Picasso's people from the carnival -- the weightlifter and

the little boy with the ball -- they're incredibly humanistic paintings. A new book by Richardson calls them somewhat sentimental, he says Picasso thought they were too, that's why he stopped the Rose period. But there's a humanistic dimension in art regardless of how the artist chooses to work. It doesn't have to be literal to be humanistic, you see. Whether you like them or not the Italian artist Alberto Burri [he spells it] who gave up medicine to paste old burlap sacks together for the rest of his life and stitch them together like you stitch a body in surgery, this is a very humanistic thing but it's totally abstract, just a few pieces of burlap there.

There are many people like that of this nature. They sometimes do it on a kind of spiritual or metaphysical level. I think that's good when it happens like that. Tapiés is another one whose early works were very humanistic, I don't know about the recent pieces, but those walls with the cross and the inscriptions on them had very humanistic concern.

There are many artists like that. If you think about it for a little while you can think of many who did that. And some very abstract people, like Baziotes maybe, but what I mean by "humanistic" is not propaganda. The main statement of the painting may be something else but as you look at it you sense that who painted this was alive and breathing and some of that is in the painting somehow. Do you know what I mean? Man-made for other men, that's what it is; this way. You see that in Braque, there's plenty of it in Braque, and in Paul Klee of course it's all over the place. There are many artists who are like that, but that's important to me.

ROBERT BROWN: That's one of the principal engines that drives you.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes, because people say, "Why paint?" I often have told students and others, it's not a matter of how to paint, which is what most people worry about today, how to paint, "how shall I make this?" It's why to paint in the first place. I remember Jason Burger [phon.sp.] in Boston saying, saying "that's because I have to, I have to paint, I can't not paint." Well, that's another way of looking at it and it's probably a similar idea. Why spent the years painting, see? There's got to be some reason. I mean, nearly anyone can make decorative things, it's not difficult, it's like learning to play the scales on a piano.

ROBERT BROWN: But you have some real yearning, real need.

ROBERT NEUMAN: I have need to express myself but also what I express wants to be of some interest to other human beings. Not just stylistic renderings or mannerisms or stuff like this, you see. Young painters today are terribly mannered, that's the way to a vacuous solution.

ROBERT BROWN: Is much of this, do you suppose, because the art world in general and artists certainly are much more self-conscious, much more aware than they were, say, when you began in the late 40s?

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. There weren't so many artists then, but I think the reason there's so much mannerism today is for money. Many young artists see money out there and say, "if he can do it that way I'll do it that way too, and then I'll have -- " The other day I was talking to Harold .....[his name], Boston sculptor, and he said he was talking to some young kid who said, "Well, I'm going to make sculpture now, and if I don't 'make it' by the time I'm 30, I'm going to do something else." It's money he's interested in.

Wolfgang Wols made practically nothing from his art and he died from alcoholism and everything else but now, you see, his paintings have become very important because they're very fine, interesting, and very humanistic paintings. He's one of those few artists who's really a high point in

the quality of art, when somebody can make these non-objective scribblings like Wols did, with watercolor on paper, and the next time he comes around he paints a sailboat, and it all seems consistent. It doesn't seem to matter whether he has a sailboat there or just scribblings which are totally abstract: the work remains very profound, still profound.

That's another interesting dimension to art: certain artists mix the language. Kandinsky mixed the language, Paul Klee did. Many people have mixed the language and many have not. But I like the idea of mixing languages, and that's not a popular thing. The scholars think that's inconsistent. If you mix Expressionism, say, with Purism or something like that. That's a no-no, you can't do that, say the scholars and historians. But many people did it. It's something no one ever talks about, and when they do nobody understands what they're talking about. (he laughs) But they didn't do that for no reason, they did it because there was a result there. That's to me an important thing too. Wols was fooling around a little bit with it, too; it was an unusual thing.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, certainly in your *Lame Deer* paintings you mix almost recognizable forms with associational power with purely abstract elements.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. I believe very few artists do that. That's something I came about by accident, then I started looking around, looking at paintings and I found that other people had gotten into that bailiwick also. So it's something that's in my mind a lot. It's not a very popular thing, I'll tell you that. People have a hard time relating to it. But if it helps to make the painting more profound, there's no reason why you shouldn't do it.

ROBERT BROWN: (after an interval when they evidently move paintings around) When the goes to the museum you lose control.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. You can't decide which pieces, you can't decide where they go, you can't decide nothing.

ROBERT BROWN: How do you feel about this? Has it been upsetting from now on?

ROBERT NEUMAN: I can't do anything about this. Now it's even worse, with Fairbrother over there, that Brice Marden show he made. There's other artists besides Brice Marden, it's a crutch show, you know -- leaning on Beckmann and Greeks and everybody else. It's one thing if you write that on a piece of paper and put it on the wall, but when you put the objects there it's a different story. And so it is with the galleries or even here in Boston they do it.

But that's the godsend about this place in Maine: it's an old decrepit building. It's a summer gallery and she has to show junk there that people buy because you've only got eight weeks to make a living in, you don't have a whole year. But still when I come with my paintings, she says, "put them in there, you've got quite a few, I don't know if we can get --" And when you hang a show she puts them all up. She doesn't say "take this out, I don't like it." If you bring too many she says, "Bob, there just isn't room" but it's not on the painting itself, it's because the building isn't any bigger. So she's wonderful like that. No matter who it is she lets show there, she doesn't go to your house and say, "I'll take two of those and --" "Bring it over here" and the artists pick it. That's a wonderful thing.

ROBERT BROWN: But that's a great exception.

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. She hangs the show but then she always asks, "How do you like it?" I say, "Well, I don't know, I was thinking of hanging this one over there" and she says, "Well, I tried it but it didn't work, the light isn't good over there in that corner" or something like that. That's what I like

about her. Whether that's a smart thing financially is another question, but she's like that forever. Well, she's a painter herself, you see; she doesn't paint very much any more. And she's also a very empathetic person. Her nickname is Thistle, her real name is Aurelia Brown. Her brother is in Brown Brothers Harriman, her father was a multi-millionaire in banking in Philadelphia; in the Depression he lost everything. She was his one daughter.

Then he remarried and had other children and she was sort of neglected. Her half-brothers and -sisters come to visit once in a while, they're all quite well-do-do and don't hang around much because she's wandering around in torn sneakers and one thing and another. She has photographs of the Victorian mansion where they used to live, with maids and ponies and ice sculpture on the dining room table, and a mansion in Newport. But he lost it all; he loaned it to coal companies in the Depression and they all went under and he went under too. So now the coal companies send her a check every month, because they're trying to show their appreciation, somehow to pay back his help when they needed it.

ROBERT BROWN: You're fortunate then, having her --

ROBERT NEUMAN: Oh, she's incredible.

ROBERT BROWN: Have you ever minded saying goodbye to your paintings?

ROBERT NEUMAN: No. I know that they take better care of them than I do, but after a number of years -- I started a program this year to go and get the paintings and bring them here and clean and varnish them. Because the heat in apartments dries up everything so much. You'd be surprised how hard that is, people get suspicious. I say, "no charge, only thing you have to pay is the transportation, I'll take care of everything else." "What is he up to?" They think I'm trying to do something. I'm not doing anything, I'm just trying to preserve the paintings! (laughing) What a difference after you clean and varnish them.

Geeses, the Pedazos del Mundo up on Beacon Hill, all blues, oh it's a nice one, and it was dry, brittle. I cleaned it, put a nice on it, (loud whistle) WOW, the blue came up like it was painted -- I tell them, "Listen, the painting will look like it was painted 30 minutes ago. Just get it over here." "Well" (he makes mumbling sounds) "I don't know, we like it like it is." I say, "This is a preservative measure here, I'm trying to be sure that 20 or 50 years from now it's still going to be in good shape."

ROBERT BROWN: When you move to your new studio, you're going to have more room. Do you think this is going to affect somewhat the way you work, you'll be able to --

ROBERT NEUMAN: Well, it might, somewhat. See, when I came here there was another place just across the hall. I couldn't afford both of them, so now there's an Italian social club there. They'll never move that, they've got pull but I'm going to move in. I had a big place like this before, and it made it wonderful because you could spread out lots of paintings. For instance, over in the corner there I have a painting seven, eight feet high and 34 feet long called "Pelouse [phon.sp.] Prairie." Pelouse is in Idaho. It's poured in a certain technique, not a thing I developed, and I'd like to take it up to Maine. It takes a whole wall in a gallery but I think it's getting damaged and I've got to unroll it and I can't do it until I get it over there. It took the whole floor of the gallery in Waltham and I could just barely walk around the edge of the room.

When I painted it, it's so big I had to walk in the painting in my socks, got paint all over my socks. But I like to see that painting up on the wall. I put it up a few times but I don't know if I could put it up on this wall, they've got benches all around the wall where Odd Fellow lodge brothers sat. Hardwood



floors, it's all dusty, it's beautiful, I don't know why the guy is renting. "You know, I'm going to get paint on them" --if I go there, I can't help it, I'll spill paint, you can't stop it, accidents happen. "I know," he says, "my daughter goes to Smith, I was over there and the painting students and everywhere paint. That's all right, I understand, we're never going to use that room, if you want to rent it it's OK, it's a minor thing to us."

ROBERT BROWN: So you're looking forward a lot --

ROBERT NEUMAN: Yes. I say, "Listen, I don't have classes in there, I don't have parties, I don't have drugs, it's just one person in this room. I don't even have a radio. So you don't need to worry about anything --fire, or any kind of crazy vandalism and so on." He says, "OK, I understand." (both laugh) They like it, you know, once they have an artist in the building. This guy is Italian, he likes an Italian social club but on the other hand he's losing his shirt here because nobody's renting the spaces, so he wants me out so he can put another apartment in. He makes nice apartments -- there are some big wood beams in this building, he takes down the plaster and geezes, it's pretty nice.

END OF INTERVIEW

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