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Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Paul Bodin, 1993
March 11

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Paul Bodin on March 11, 1993. The interview took place in [Place], and was conducted by Stephen Polcari for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The sound quality for this interview is poor throughout, leading to an abnormally high number of inaudible sections. The Archives of American Art has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

STEPHEN POLCARI: Okay. Archives of American Art Interview, March 11, 1993, with Stephen Polcari with Paul Bodine.

PAUL BODIN: Bodin.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Bodin, and James Weschler.

JAMES WESCHLER: Weschler.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Weschler. Well, it's a start. Okay. Well, I want to begin our discussion, uh, your career. When did it actually begin? In terms, when did you decide you wanted to be a painter?

PAUL BODIN: Well, I guess it began when I was about five years old. I made little drawings and stuff like that. I was on WPA easel project.

STEPHEN POLCARI: How—but that was later.

PAUL BODIN: Yes. And I was surrounded by my work, as you can see.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes, yes.

PAUL BODIN: I don't know what else to say.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Well, first of all, where were you born, and where did you grow up?

PAUL BODIN: I was born in the Bronx in 1910, when I [inaudible] two years old.

STEPHEN POLCARI: But you spent your entire life in the City.

PAUL BODIN: Most, yes.

STEPHEN POLCARI: At that time, your family, did they have any connection to the arts?

PAUL BODIN: None.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Whatsoever. So, this was completely on your own?

PAUL BODIN: Right.

STEPHEN POLCARI: But you said you started or got interested when you were five? You did drawings, you started doing drawings.

PAUL BODIN: Yes. And I was doing them all along in school, and I went to the National Academy of Design. [00:02:02] Lasted there for three months. It was very boring.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Which—when did you do that?

PAUL BODIN: I guess I was about 18.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Eighteen. Until that time, you had regular schooling, high school? [Cross talk.]

PAUL BODIN: Yes, yes. I was [inaudible] high school. I think I'm—I think I'm getting started. We—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Did you draw continually through high school on your own—

PAUL BODIN: Yes. In high school, I made friends with Stivus van Veen [ph], and I was his assistant on the school paper and stuff like that. I met Adolph Gottlieb when I was about 16, and he was 23.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Aha.

PAUL BODIN: And he is the one who told me to forget about National Academy of Design already was bored with it. He recommended that I study with John Sloan.

STEPHEN POLCARI: At the [cross talk] that he started.

PAUL BODIN: So what—to be honest with you, John Sloan was finished there.

STEPHEN POLCARI: When was that? That was the '20s. Wasn't that in the '20s?

PAUL BODIN: I guess so.

STEPHEN POLCARI: About 1930?

PAUL BODIN: But instead, I got a very good teacher, Borgman Robinson [ph].

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes. Borgman Robinson.

PAUL BODIN: And I was very much attracted to him. He came around twice during the week to criticize my work, and if he liked it, he'd put a little X on the bottom, and it was hung on the stairwell someplace. I've got a couple of those.

STEPHEN POLCARI: You studied with him how long?

PAUL BODIN: About three months. The reason—and then I went to the croquis class. The reason I did that, Borgman Robinson asked a student, who I later became friendly with, his name was Joe Goodman [ph], he was the monitor of the class. [00:04:10] And he said, "How long have you been in my class?" Joe Goodman said, "Two years." Borgman Robinson says, "Oh my, that's much too long. You oughta learn how to draw. Are you gonna—just exchange ideas." I thought that was very [inaudible], so after three months, I went to the croquis class, croquis [inaudible], was there for a couple months, and that's all my story.

STEPHEN POLCARI: What's his name? Crokey [ph]?

PAUL BODIN: The croquis class is a class without a teacher.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh, and that was called a Crokey class?

PAUL BODIN: Yeah. Is that familiar to you? [Inaudible] French [inaudible].

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh, croquis, sketch. The sketch class. Aha, aha. And that had a model?

PAUL BODIN: That's new to me. I'm learning something.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah. Croquis means sketch in French. And that had a model and worked from the model but without any instructor in the room?

PAUL BODIN: Yes, right.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Aha. And that was it? This is after high school.

PAUL BODIN: Yes.

STEPHEN POLCARI: What time do you think? 1928, '29?

PAUL BODIN: I think so. Probably '29, '30.

STEPHEN POLCARI: '29 or '30, okay. So, that was your training?

PAUL BODIN: Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Borgman Robinson was very varied. He had—I think he had worked on a newspaper. He was just about to do some murals at that time, maybe even left the Art Students League, I don't know, to do some murals, and that sort of helped get America's mural movement off the ground. He and Benton, who of course was also at the League there. But you had these months. What did you do afterwards, after that training? That was a basic sketch class with Rodman [ph]?

PAUL BODIN: Yes. And then I went out on my own. [00:06:05]

STEPHEN POLCARI: Aha.

PAUL BODIN: I did some teaching, and from teaching, I learned probably more than the students. Student would ask me, "Mr. Bodin, I have [inaudible]. How do you make it—how do you draw a tree?" So, I had to tell them how do I want to draw a tree, like Cézanne or [inaudible]? I said, "Why don't draw your own tree? Forget about how to draw the tree, what it looks like." That kind of thing. Anyways—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Just continued your education in teaching.

PAUL BODIN: Yeah. There were only a few students who appreciated that approach. They really wanted me, for the most part, how to draw this, how to draw water, you know?

STEPHEN POLCARI: They wanted to be told how to think, and then they would follow along.

PAUL BODIN: Yeah. But I did get a couple of very nice letters at the end of the—it was something like eight sessions—from several people. It was an interesting experience.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Where was this, though?

PAUL BODIN: Um, I think it was—I did some teaching in Brooklyn. I don't—I just don't remember.

STEPHEN POLCARI: How was the place in Brooklyn? A school or a church?

PAUL BODIN: It was a school. It was a school there. And I'm really trying to remember some of the teachers there, you know, that I became friendly with. [00:08:05]

STEPHEN POLCARI: But you were out there how long?

PAUL BODIN: Not very long. Probably six months or less. Did I ever write down any of this?

JAMES WESCHLER: No. I remember you talking about the children that you taught, but that was part of the WPA. This is something else.

PAUL BODIN: Yeah. This is a writer or something [inaudible].

STEPHEN POLCARI: So, you did that, but you just increased your skills, et cetera. What did you do—I guess the WPA came along. What were you looking at? You just were looking at things or thinking about—did you decide to be a professional artist at that point?

PAUL BODIN: Yes. My mind was made up very early about that. I think became close with Milton Avery at this point, right?

JAMES WESCHLER: Yes.

PAUL BODIN: Got [cross talk] Milton Avery.

STEPHEN POLCARI: So, you were friendly with Avery, too. He was very friendly with Dotley [ph].

PAUL BODIN: Yes. Early in 1930, and spent a lot of time with Avery and his wife, [inaudible] I was very friendly with his wife.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Sally.

PAUL BODIN: Sally, yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Did you work together? Did you paint together?

PAUL BODIN: I did some sketching with Avery.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Jointly?

PAUL BODIN: Yes. This was in Provincetown. I spent some time in Boston and in Provincetown. And quite private at the time, with Milton and Sally Avery, sketching. We [inaudible].

STEPHEN POLCARI: I think it was a frequent place for artists. [00:10:00] Gottlieb worked there, I think Radka [ph] went there. Everybody went there to sketch. Gloucester [ph] was always an important American topic. You did that for a number of—so, you're doing landscapes.

PAUL BODIN: Yes.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Landscapes and whatever. And do you remember anything about your work at that time?

PAUL BODIN: I did a lot of—and I still have a lot of tentative drawings. It's something I'm fond of doing. When I do it to this day, one of my recent things, which I'll show you later, are watercolors. They're watercolors, with a lot of ink work on top of them. I would draw the [inaudible]—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Well, we'll see them after the interview. So, you did that for a number of years, just landscapes. How did you support yourself?

PAUL BODIN: I supported myself. Here I am, right? [They laugh.]

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes.

PAUL BODIN: Oh yes. Listen, my wife Barbara and I did technical illustration for publishers, Appleton, Sanctuary, Croft, Oxford University Press, and quite a few others. As a matter of fact, I still have the book that we entered all the jobs we got from them. And we were very busy because we were very good, especially my wife. She died in 1993. Yes.

STEPHEN POLCARI: You were married then. [00:12:00]

PAUL BODIN: Yes. One year.

JAMES WESCHLER: You were married to Barbara then?

PAUL BODIN: I was married to Barbara—no. I'm trying to figure this out. I wish I had tried to think about this before you came. But yes, I was married to Sadie, my first wife, for 25 years, and Barbara for 25 years. Barbara left in 1980 to go to Maui [inaudible]. By that time, she was sick with cancer, and she lasted there for three years. And I don't think she would have lasted here for that—she actually got better, miracle treatment there, because I spoke to her a couple of times a week.

STEPHEN POLCARI: But this was your first wife, Sadie. She was the technical illustrator.

PAUL BODIN: No. That was Barbara.

JAMES WESCHLER: You were very young when you got married, weren't you?

PAUL BODIN: Yes, I—yeah. Yes, very young.

JAMES WESCHLER: That must have been around—

PAUL BODIN: Twenty-one. What happened was we went to get married, but I wasn't 21 yet. They said I had to bring my parents, and I said to hell with that, so we waited until I was 21 and got married. That's how that went.

JAMES WESCHLER: So, it was 1931.

PAUL BODIN: You get to remember some of this stuff.

STEPHEN POLCARI: But somehow, you survived in those early '30s doing these sketches.

PAUL BODIN: Technical illustration.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Technical illustration.

PAUL BODIN: As a matter of fact, I—some of the books we worked on, big ones, you know. Big books. As a matter of fact, in one case, Barbara spent a week or two at the publisher working on this stuff because she needed this kind of close contact. [00:14:09]

STEPHEN POLCARI: Well, so that was a decent life for you in the Depression, considering that that was the Depression.

PAUL BODIN: We did—one year, we made \$30,000, which was—

STEPHEN POLCARI: A phenomenal amount of money at that time.

PAUL BODIN: That was—but we did pretty well. When I married Barbara, she didn't have any money, and I had \$4,000, and we just kept getting richer and richer.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes. Yes. I recommend that. [They laugh.] But you did this, honestly—you did these sketches and worked in technical illustration, and then you worked in the WPA. That came along as an opportunity for you.

PAUL BODIN: Yes. The WPA, the beauty of that, of course, was that you worked at home, and if you handed in—I think it was something like a couple of watercolors every three months or an oil painting—and someplace, I've got a list of all the things that I gave the WPA. Later, I found out that some of them were put in public [inaudible]. That's it. I've got that around someplace.

STEPHEN POLCARI: So, you worked in the WPA for several years in New York under Hozier Caygill [ph] and Julie Arforce [ph] was the local director. And this was the easel project? [00:16:01]

PAUL BODIN: Yes. I was on the easel project.

STEPHEN POLCARI: And you did landscapes also? That was your basic style, and watercolors?

PAUL BODIN: Well, actually, for the most part, a lot of portraits, because they had models that they would send, and I would paint the models, and I still have some of those things around. That landscape was not of any particular interest. That's kind of the thing. I did a lot of—

STEPHEN POLCARI: At that time, a list of—

JAMES WESCHLER: [Inaudible.]

PAUL BODIN: I think that is '61 or something like that.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh, much later.

PAUL BODIN: Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: At that time, though, the WPA was very conventional, and your landscapes and things are very abstract, but it was fine. Did you need to do that? You were in good shape, right?

PAUL BODIN: At that point, I remember I—we had to get on welfare and stuff like that. When it came to welfare, I had a dispossess in my pocket.

JAMES WESCHLER: [Inaudible] anything else?

PAUL BODIN: Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Aha. Portrait-like work. You did that for the WPA.

PAUL BODIN: Yes.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Very representational, soft-colors work. And you did—how long were you on the—do you remember your dates on the WPA? '36, '38, '39?

PAUL BODIN: Is that the carboard, by any chance, the timing? No? At 82, I suppose I'm permitted to forget. [00:18:03] I think I [inaudible] forget.

STEPHEN POLCARI: No, no, no.

PAUL BODIN: But she—I'll tell you, I can remember things that happened very long ago better than I can some that happened yesterday. That just has the different—

JAMES WESCHLER: The different series.

PAUL BODIN: —the different series, yeah.

JAMES WESCHLER: It looks like you started the music series in 1939, now. Was that part of the WPA, or had you finished by then?

PAUL BODIN: '39? The music series?

JAMES WESCHLER: That's '41.

PAUL BODIN: That's another one of the music series. Very different treatment. The series that I did—say, I have to have a theme, and I had reaching figures. To me, that was aspiration. Now, other people saw it, I got all kinds of reactions to it, because—yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: But this much later. This is much later. Looking at some works of stick-like figures reaching, but we'll deal—what's the dates on these?

JAMES WESCHLER: '70, '72, '73.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Seventies. But you weren't—looking at the WPA portrait, you weren't anywhere close to that at that time. You were doing more representational work here. You started this music series. This is—

PAUL BODIN: That's 1941, I think. Isn't it?

JAMES WESCHLER: Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: That is almost—just a touch of cubism, cubic design, in this work. [00:20:00] '41, that was during the war years. You were able to work through the war, to paint through the war?

PAUL BODIN: Yes. I had a child, and I was never called up.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Aha.

PAUL BODIN: I did some work in a war plant, but that didn't last very long.

STEPHEN POLCARI: So, you worked in a war plant?

PAUL BODIN: Yeah. That was [inaudible].

STEPHEN POLCARI: You were around the City.

PAUL BODIN: Yeah. In the [inaudible].

STEPHEN POLCARI: So, you were able to paint when you weren't working.

PAUL BODIN: Yeah. I—what happened in one case, and I'm trying to remember where this was. I had a full-time job during the war. Gee, that's right. I worked nine hours a day, [inaudible] weeks, and I started at [inaudible]. I couldn't get any place with them because the other stuff intervened, and I realized I wasn't getting—I had four of them, about the same size. So, I decided to work in templar [ph], because then I could do four of them in one sitting instead of working on—one was very good, because I would use the lot of them, and then I work on—there's other things and push them [inaudible]. That worked out very well. I'm trying to think where that is. It'd be interesting if someone owns that.

STEPHEN POLCARI: So, these templar, you could produce a lot of work right away, and you had an independent career. [00:22:01] Was—but painting, you consider yourself a full-time painter at that time.

PAUL BODIN: Yes.

STEPHEN POLCARI: You had a child, a wife and a child, and you were working in defense and painting along. And with this—starting to learn cubism after Avery. You were a little more interested in modern things, I guess, at that time. There was just a change in—first, for yourself, [inaudible] in relation to cubism from this [inaudible]?

PAUL BODIN: It's—it's an illustration problem.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah. Well, it's very tangential. It's much straight-edge and flat-color type of thing, only in most general terms, but it's still representational, and you remain representational in the '40s.

PAUL BODIN: Yes. I started to tell you that I did a series call "Reaching for the Stars." That's, to me, aspiration. People didn't—I got very different reactions. One fellow came up in '61, I remember, [inaudible] and looked around at these, and he said, "Oh, these are religious, aren't they?" I said, "Yes. They're from the party." But my

—have to have a thing. Things that started—and this is a very [inaudible] but that series, I called, "Looking for Godot," not waiting, because that's hopeful in spite of a large area with small people, they're scurrying back and forth. [00:24:00] To me, in spite of everything else, that's hopeful.

STEPHEN POLCARI: What was the date of this particular work over here? The figures scurrying around the ground. What's the date?

PAUL BODIN: That lasted for a long time.

JAMES WESCHLER: Early '80s? Yeah '80. Early 1980 for this one.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Is that so?

JAMES WESCHLER: Yeah. Did you mention the airplane paintings during World War II?

PAUL BODIN: I did that.

JAMES WESCHLER: He did a lot of those.

PAUL BODIN: '41, yes.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Airplane paintings during the war? Yeah?

PAUL BODIN: Yeah. With—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Does there—

JAMES WESCHLER: I was looking for one in particular, but this one has some of the behind the curtains.

PAUL BODIN: Yes.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Aha, aha. This was just inspired by a war production or the war atmosphere?

PAUL BODIN: It's a portrait of the airplane.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Why the airplane? That was it? That was in the war?

PAUL BODIN: Yeah. [Inaudible.]

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes. These are plane themes of the—it looks like a dog fight.

PAUL BODIN: Yes, and my family. My easel.

STEPHEN POLCARI: And this above, here, this was from your imagination, I assume.

PAUL BODIN: Yeah. But—yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Was this a fear for you? A dream or something you saw? The idea of dog fight with your family below? [00:26:00]

PAUL BODIN: Just got the idea and worked it out. This is a self-portrait with airplanes.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Both split. It's sort of like a bi-level canvas with a still-life and window as over here, and this portrait at the same time. Was this a suggestion of your imagination, stirring your imagination?

PAUL BODIN: Just my imagination. I see some Avery influence in this, I think.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Well, there's a touch. This is somewhat like Avery perhaps, and Gottlieb did something similar. Were you friendly with Gottlieb at this time?

PAUL BODIN: Oh, very friendly with Gottlieb, but I don't—I don't think so.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh, he did a couple still-lives in the late '30s also. So, you also did these war things. Did you work in a plan factory? Is that your war work?

PAUL BODIN: There was a short period I worked, and the funny thing is what I remember most about it is in the toilet there, somebody had made a sketch over the sink, and I thought it was terrific and liked it, but I don't have much memories of that time. I know I was living in a brownstone house with my wife and baby son, and it was [inaudible]. [00:28:09] At one point, there was a New York City festival of some kind where they made floats, and

they had a big parade and all that stuff, and I got to working on one of those. This was when we lived in the brownstone. It was 36 hours straight work right through. Came home completely exhausted, but they did well because of overtime and things like that.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh, wow. America was in—economically was getting in good shape during the war because of all the war production. You had a family and the war work, and the WPA was over, and you were working on these war images or plane images, and tempera paintings, too, you said. Then, after the war, what happened? The atmosphere in America changed in painting. Did that affect you at all?

PAUL BODIN: You know, influences that I had were I think disappeared about that time. I worked pretty much on my own. The reaching figures, Adolph Gottlieb saw early ones and was very disappointed in me and said, you know, why—he said, "I had some painters over. I asked them a question about this painting, showing them objects on the table. [00:30:11] And I talked to them about it, and I've got some ideas for you. I think you're off on the wrong track. I cannot otherwise accept that they're still reaching for this, but they won't—" At some point, I realized that I just can't make a quick sketch and paint it. I've got to make a sketch and study it and make a thickness of line sketch, which is what I did. And I had this kind of result from it, which I'm very pleased with.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Well, this is much later, though. This is '80s, over here. At that time, you were changing things around. What direction did you take after the war? Was this is, over here?

JAMES WESCHLER: Yes. '45, '46.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Is that the columns?

JAMES WESCHLER: Yeah.

PAUL BODIN: Yes. The columns.

JAMES WESCHLER: '46, '48.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah. You were doing structures and columns at this time.

PAUL BODIN: Yes.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Why columns? They have a Classical reference.

PAUL BODIN: Sometimes very interesting happened about this time. I went to see a show, the Vieille de Sylva [ph], and saw that she had done stones, and I was absolutely—I thought that things were just beautiful. But this was the one influenced by it. [00:32:01] This was simply [inaudible].

JAMES WESCHLER: Did you do it from primitive man, piling up stones?

PAUL BODIN: Yes, that was the idea.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Primitive man, piling on stones?

PAUL BODIN: Piling on stones. It was some kind of crude sculpture. Yeah, just—

STEPHEN POLCARI: But that's a change for you. Why that idea at that time? You got interested in the primitive?

PAUL BODIN: Yes. Yeah. I've always—I've had an interesting thing about the long time.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes, I noticed the collection around—when did you begin that?

PAUL BODIN: Oh, that's been pretty long time, too. I'm trying to remember my first things.

JAMES WESCHLER: You've got the Paris farmer [ph]. Gottlieb actually gave you a throwing knife.

PAUL BODIN: Oh yeah. Yes.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Gottlieb gave you a throwing knife?

PAUL BODIN: Yes.

STEPHEN POLCARI: An African throwing knife?

PAUL BODIN: That's right.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Aha. Thirties or '40s or something?

PAUL BODIN: I think so. I think it was—could it be the '30s?

JAMES WESCHLER: I'm not sure he gave it to you, but he told you to start collecting really—I'm sorry, he didn't start collecting [inaudible] until he went to Paris, I think it was—I think in the '60s.

PAUL BODIN: That's right. That really was fun. What did I call—we ran out of lemon, and I said to the dealer that I would like to pick out some things, and [inaudible] and then he sent me this. He said, "Take it. When you get home, you study [inaudible]." [Laughs.]

STEPHEN POLCARI: Which is the old days.

PAUL BODIN: Which is what I did. [00:33:58] I came home, it was Saturday, and I had to wait until Monday because I was worried. Four years later, I saw this guy again. He didn't remember me. He didn't—I tried to communicate. He didn't know much English, and my French was not very good. But it was fun.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Aha. Well, this fragment work, as you call them, and columns, especially primitive columns, put together as though the origins of civilization or whatever. Did you have—what ideas were you interested in at that time?

PAUL BODIN: I think largely the fact that primitive art has a passion and a power. Maybe I could reflect on that as [inaudible]. I don't know.

JAMES WESCHLER: You don't?

PAUL BODIN: I don't know that that was the [inaudible] at the time. I just—because it was a possibility.

JAMES WESCHLER: You were—[inaudible] and Gottlieb talking a lot about this around this time, when you were hanging out with each other?

STEPHEN POLCARI: You hung out with them, Gottlieb and the Averys? [Inaudible.]

PAUL BODIN: Well, Adolph is more American [inaudible]. But he [inaudible] things like this. He died before I could—he used to [inaudible], and I probably didn't [inaudible].

STEPHEN POLCARI: When you start, and that was when? In the '50s or '60s? [00:36:00]

PAUL BODIN: Does the [inaudible]?

JAMES WESCHLER: Early stick figures? Yeah, I think those were in the late '50s, because that was the show you had at Betty Parsons' [ph].

STEPHEN POLCARI: At Betty Parsons'. That was '59. We have a catalog here from Betty Parsons' in 1959. Yes, the stick figures—

PAUL BODIN: That's the triptych, yes.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes. It looks like your stick figures are very well-developed at that time. Let's get in the drawer. You made these figures yourself? I mean, what led you to reduce the figure to this? Was this raw idea or primitive or simple?

PAUL BODIN: What made me reduce it to the—

STEPHEN POLCARI: To these angular little, simple linear planes.

PAUL BODIN: These were my people, you know? I want to say something about—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Betty Parsons? 1959. How did that show go for you? This was your first show with her?

PAUL BODIN: I'm not sure. She used to—she had me in grouping shows for quite a while and in end-of-the-year shows, and then finally gave me a one-man show.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. This material in '59, but you were still a full-time painter.

PAUL BODIN: Yeah. That's the triptych in that—was what—yes, I've got that in—

JAMES WESCHLER: You have that here.

PAUL BODIN: Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: So, this was actually, these stick figures reaching out, portraits of hope to you, aspiration.

PAUL BODIN: Right, right.

STEPHEN POLCARI: They're very positive things. [00:38:00]

PAUL BODIN: Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: And you felt the need to do things. Did you feel the rest of the art world was rather negative?

PAUL BODIN: I always used to make the rounds in the galleries on Saturday, and I remember the last time I did it, I got as far as 72nd Street, and I said, what the hell am I doing here? I just wanted to see a few things. I was very bored with the scene. All the things I saw was splashy, big—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Very painter-y, New York School stuff.

PAUL BODIN: Yeah. Just boring. So, I retired from making the rounds.

STEPHEN POLCARI: From making—well, one eventually does retire from making the rounds. These are very much different from New York School things. They're flat, hard-edged color, very linear. They have not—they're not the painterly works of the '50s. So, this was a very different direction for you.

PAUL BODIN: Yeah. Yeah.

JAMES WESCHLER: These [inaudible] you started breaking the [inaudible].

PAUL BODIN: Yeah, I broke the columns.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Which are these little fragments.

PAUL BODIN: Fragments, yeah, fragment to fragment things. I got that vocation I think from Lucretius.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Fragment to fragment things.

PAUL BODIN: Things until we no longer name them, something like that.

STEPHEN POLCARI: These were the late '40s, these works were from the late '40s.

PAUL BODIN: I think so.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Again, they're rather simple. Block-like, wedge-like forms, perhaps under a moonlight. Are they figurative? Is this a bare suggestion of a figure here?

PAUL BODIN: No, I don't think so.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Figural disposition of the shapes?

PAUL BODIN: No, I think—this was a particular [inaudible]. [00:40:03]

JAMES WESCHLER: Yeah. [Inaudible.]

STEPHEN POLCARI: The name's on the front, but another fragment series, *Bejeweled*, as though they have cosmic signs on them of some sort. Was there an intentional meaning to those shapes?

PAUL BODIN: No. Not really. I liked working with fragments, and I liked that quotation of Lucretius.

STEPHEN POLCARI: So, you were reading Lucretius, but the idea of working with fragments was interesting to you.

PAUL BODIN: Yeah. I just wanted to see where I had—I guess I don't have it there. The quotation I use on all of my—

JAMES WESCHLER: These are some works on paper from the period around the same time as the columns, I guess just before, *Ink Dries*.

STEPHEN POLCARI: So, this is '46 to '48.

JAMES WESCHLER: Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: These are pen and inks.

JAMES WESCHLER: Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: So, stacked, stone-like Michael with [ph] and manulary [ph] type shapes, almost like alters of some sort. These are out of the blue. They're seemingly rather mythic, ritualistic.

PAUL BODIN: [Inaudible.] You open the bone, you know? There's jewels here.

JAMES WESCHLER: Traded the bone first.

PAUL BODIN: The one, yeah, yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Sort of like stone- and bone-like forms in this work. This is the late '40s also that are very [inaudible]. [00:42:08] This is—however, the stick figures are quite a change from this type of work. What led you to the stick figures? Was it radical or overnight?

PAUL BODIN: It's abstract. It was maybe cubism, but I did a batch of these.

JAMES WESCHLER: You said you wanted to do something with modern [inaudible]?

STEPHEN POLCARI: Is this your structure series?

PAUL BODIN: What did I call this?

JAMES WESCHLER: These are *Hard Edge*.

PAUL BODIN: *Hard Edge*.

JAMES WESCHLER: Right before the stick figure stuff.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Right before the stick figures, a flat field over here of odd shapes, almost like a broken grid-like—set of grid-like fragments put together, but painterly. It must have been unusual to be not painterly in the '50s since that was the style. Everybody was painterly, and you go against colors.

PAUL BODIN: By painterly, you mean this free thing.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah. The free thing, yeah.

PAUL BODIN: Yeah. That was very—

JAMES WESCHLER: Was it ever—was it introduced to the [inaudible].

PAUL BODIN: Yeah. I found one day not very interested anymore. I was—there was such a fuss made about it. To me, it—some others, it comes out fine. Then, there's a certain [inaudible].

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STEPHEN POLCARI: Side two. Yes, these things, the grid-like—broken grid-like things do lead seemingly into the reaching figures, and they're sort of flat shapes. Are those flat lines, is that partially Mondrian-like?

PAUL BODIN: Yes. It—I wanted to make them more human, you know? I think there are other ways that you can actually see a thing.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Some of them have figures, yeah.

JAMES WESCHLER: [Inaudible.]

PAUL BODIN: I think there's one in the storeroom on the floor that maybe has the thing.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Okay. But this was in the middle of the '50s, those works, when you switched to these reaching, stick-like figures, about the middle of the '50s.

PAUL BODIN: Yes, I think so. These are very refined. And since there is only two colors, and I have to keep them flat, what I decided was that I was using a warm and a cool, a silver and a gold, I formed them, as silver and gold on this. And I filed through all of them. I tried different things. Oh yeah, there's a figure through this.

STEPHEN POLCARI: This is one of the labyrinth-like figures.

PAUL BODIN: Yes. [00:02:02]

STEPHEN POLCARI: Did the idea of a labyrinth enter into these works?

PAUL BODIN: You know, there—I guess, you know, I start from Mondrian in trying to make them relate to us somewhat. You know, this one I think is very fervent [inaudible]. It has the silver and gold in it that you first see, and the fact that it's only two colors means that I have to work very hard to make them exactly right. I had—this has happened to me in working on these, where I could have a silver and make another silver that was stronger that it would look like the gold. You know, it would take on some that color. That's not something that happened often, but I have changed what was silver to the gold, and because leather silver was better.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, so you worked on this style for how many years? This reaching. Early is '58 to '71, so you did this style—this is the longest style that you did.

PAUL BODIN: Yes. This interested me very much. My wife Barbara was alive then, and when I was doing the charcoal on this, and by that time, I would do the charcoal, gather the thickness of the figure, and leave it overnight. [00:04:09] Look at it the next day, make some little changes, and before I would start to paint, I would have to be satisfied that everything is exactly right. I had a painting hanging here that he gave me to celebrate—I got it probably on the rack—the silver and gold feeling. But it—there was a hand that had to be moved about an inch or so over, and it bothered me, and I took it off the wall for that reason. The only thing I could see was that hand needed to be moved about an inch over this way. That's why I became very careful before I painted it.

STEPHEN POLCARI: So, you have them pretty much laid out before you put down the color.

PAUL BODIN: Yeah. You need to know exactly what that—you know, careful, before the brush stroke.

STEPHEN POLCARI: So, you worked on this style, the sort of flat-edged stuff, for more than 10 years, and then refined it even further in the '70s into the reaching style. Would you call these the reaching style over here, or the early?

PAUL BODIN: No. These are the reaching.

STEPHEN POLCARI: These are the reaching. Okay.

PAUL BODIN: This one behind me, that's something else again.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Looks like it comes out of the '50s, grid-like elements.

PAUL BODIN: Yeah. That's one that I'm fond of for a couple of reasons.

JAMES WESCHLER: Yeah, the hands are starting to elevate themselves there. [00:06:00]

STEPHEN POLCARI: They have a cosmic quality that underlines the nature of [inaudible]. So, you've been working in this mode ever since, there, and your looking style, I don't see any looking style.

JAMES WESCHLER: [Inaudible.]

PAUL BODIN: They're looking for Godot.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh, is that was this is? This is a looking?

PAUL BODIN: Yeah. That's the beginning of it. They're looking.

STEPHEN POLCARI: So, these are simple, human term, looking, reaching, as though you try to focus and concentrate on all of these essential human conditions, if you will. They're dramatic and expressive and emotional, but very controlled in a way that is very strong. But they're not cool. They're not cool. They're actually all about human beings. That's your subject matter

PAUL BODIN: Yeah. Yes. The human quality, I wanted to try to get into [inaudible].

STEPHEN POLCARI: And you've been working in this style since the '80s. What prompted the change? Just it worked out, your mood?

PAUL BODIN: Development, I guess. Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: You wanted to repudiate the idea of Godot and hopelessness.

PAUL BODIN: Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: And thus, have more positive and if you will, less unhappiness in life, in the work.

PAUL BODIN: Yes. Very much so. [00:08:01]

STEPHEN POLCARI: Now, after you exhibited with Parsons in '59, was that your first one-man show?

PAUL BODIN: I don't think so. I think my first one-man show was something in the '30s.

STEPHEN POLCARI: It was in the '30s. It was with the Roster [ph] things.

PAUL BODIN: There was a dealer, a jeweler, whose daughter and son-in-law were interested in painting, and they gave Avery a show there and Gottlieb and me.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Is that—

JAMES WESCHLER: I think the first one here is the Eighth Street Gallery.

PAUL BODIN: Oh, that was something else. That was a theater, a movie theater. They had—it showed films.

JAMES WESCHLER: In the Artists' Gallery, you showed at the Laurel Gallery a lot in the '40s, mid-'40s.

PAUL BODIN: Yes.

JAMES WESCHLER: And also, the New Gallery.

STEPHEN POLCARI: When was the New Gallery?

JAMES WESCHLER: That's '52.

STEPHEN POLCARI: '52. Who was all in that? Where was that?

JAMES WESCHLER: There may be a catalog in here.

PAUL BODIN: I think is something like 23rd Street, a couple steps down in a brownstone. There was—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Sounds like the art world was rather small then, of course, compared to today. Just a few hundred artists working, and you knew a number of them, going to their events and things. [00:10:00] And so, you had these shows, and Betty Parsons was your first stick figure show, right?

PAUL BODIN: Yes. She was very interested in them. She seemed to have a friend of hers, a [inaudible] thin guy, take a look at them. I wish I could remember his name, but he was very often at Betty's gallery. He came up and was very interested in them to be on the [inaudible].

STEPHEN POLCARI: So, she was your dealer, and that relationship lasted how long?

PAUL BODIN: It lasted until she had to leave the [inaudible] quarters, but she stayed and recruited me—she still showed me. She showed me in the Section 11 show.

STEPHEN POLCARI: She was on 57th Street. Her last space was particularly on 57th.

PAUL BODIN: Is that the space that you're in now?

JAMES WESCHLER: Yeah, 24 and 57.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Well you know, that was your art life there, that gallery, and you knew the people there, and you worked away. Did you have an outside job at that time? How did that work in terms of making a living in the post-war period?

PAUL BODIN: I'm trying to remember how long Barbara and I were. She—I think that work with Barbara ended in 1980, because in '80, she left to go to Maui, and she died there three years later. [00:12:04]

STEPHEN POLCARI: Twenty-five years, that's what, 1955 that your second marriage—

PAUL BODIN: Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: 1955. But how—did you work? Did you illustrate?

PAUL BODIN: Yes. We worked together, Barbara and I. And she tried—she was a painter, too, and I have some of her paintings, and I think she was very good. And I said—and I wanted her to keep painting. She said there was no painter [inaudible] was enough. She—

STEPHEN POLCARI: She was probably wise

PAUL BODIN: Yeah. And she did this—I have a couple of her paintings, and they're good. They're good.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Other than [inaudible], she would be the painter.

PAUL BODIN: Yeah, nowadays.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Nowadays things are different. But you worked in illustration. That provided you with sufficient funds, and then you could keep on painting.

PAUL BODIN: Yes. As I told you, we made \$30,000 one year. That was too much for me. We worked too hard. As a matter of fact, Oxford University Press said you know, you oughta raise your prices. We thought we were doing fine.

JAMES WESCHLER: You painted in the evenings, mostly?

PAUL BODIN: Yeah. I did a lot of painting work.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Well, so that's continued. When your wife left and died, you've continued working on your own. You still paint.

PAUL BODIN: Yeah. I'll show you. I'll show you those. I'm doing watercolors, but they're not much of watercolor. [00:14:00] Those are the ink work on top of them. And I'm still working on those. And I'll try to have a show of them. I've never been very keen about showing. But it's—there's a good chance on the East Side, there's a dealer who knows me there, I'll try it and see.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Well, terrific. Please send me an invitation, to the Archives here. A little back over your career then, what do you think have been the principle influences for you? Avery and you were very much interested in nature, but by the time you get to the stick figures, nature's out of it.

PAUL BODIN: Yeah. Do you see much influence in later things?

JAMES WESCHLER: At this point, no.

PAUL BODIN: I think that—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Well, you went off on—

PAUL BODIN: I don't even know if [inaudible]. This painting, which is very highly admired, my son wants it, so it's not for sale, but I could have sold that half a dozen times. Fortunately, I didn't have to depend on my painting for a living. I would have—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Had a harder time.

PAUL BODIN: You bet. [00:16:00]

STEPHEN POLCARI: Do you think that you—your admiration for tribal objects has been influential?

PAUL BODIN: I don't know that I see it in the work, although I—it may show up better in washes and drawings. I've got a mess of drawings, and I never used to sign them. I went through for my son's sake and signed a whole batch of them and got writer's cramp. I've got hundreds of drawings.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Well, looking back at your career, where would you place yourself? Would you place yourself? Do you think you belong to a generation or that you've gone off and that's it, you're on your own, you don't really belong anywhere, you've set your own direction?

PAUL BODIN: That's my feeling, and that is because of that trip I took to Soho and saw all these big paintings with lots of colors, one after the other. The only thing that I enjoyed that whole trip was—I forget the gallery, but he had a series of photographs of people in windows, all different kinds of windows, and it was something to see. The other stuff to me was meaningless. I'm not interested in something where the human quality is not as—doesn't register. [00:18:07]

STEPHEN POLCARI: And that means a visual image for you, some recognizable thing you can sink your teeth into.

PAUL BODIN: Yeah. What was that?

JAMES WESCHLER: It fell out of my pocket.

PAUL BODIN: Oh.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Well, I think that covers a lot of territory. You've been happy with your choice. You've been happy with your choices, becoming a painter and being independent. You always pay the price if you're independent, but you're happy with that.

PAUL BODIN: Yes. You know, I really am my number one fan.

STEPHEN POLCARI: [Laughs.]

PAUL BODIN: I really like these things, and I feel happy about them in spite of the fact that they just don't fit in to the scene at all. The watercolors that I've been doing lately also interest me. I don't think anybody would give me a show of my paintings, but I might give a show of these watercolors. I'll show them to you in a little bit.

STEPHEN POLCARI: I'd like to see them. I'd like to see them. Well, you've struck a hard path, and it's always hard to be on your own, but maybe now's the time, because there are fewer rules than ever in the art world. So, perhaps now's the time for an exhibition.

PAUL BODIN: Yeah. You know, I don't think I had a hard time. I really did enjoy the things I did. Someone said that artists' paint pictures to have something to look at. [00:20:00]

STEPHEN POLCARI: Barney Newman said that.

PAUL BODIN: Yeah. [Laughs.]

STEPHEN POLCARI: It's true. It's true.

PAUL BODIN: I knew Barney quite well. I knew him well.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah. [Inaudible] she's not well, apparently.

PAUL BODIN: She died?

STEPHEN POLCARI: No, but she's not well. [Inaudible.] I knew Barney, too, 25 years ago now.

PAUL BODIN: Barney had a favorite conversation. Art is boring.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes.

PAUL BODIN: He was so funny, too.

STEPHEN POLCARI: His painting took a long time to develop, too. He seems to have done some things in the '30s, but no one knows of them. He really only started painting until the '40s.

PAUL BODIN: [Inaudible] predated the '30s.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, well as long it's talked back and forth about it, the dates and everything, I think that there's always the—too bad he died. He died very young. Thirty-seven years. Well, okay. I want to thank you, and for the Archives, this will be a record that we have.

PAUL BODIN: So, let me show you—

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]