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Oral history interview with James Lechay,  
1998 July 9-Aug. 26

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with James Lechay on July 9 - Aug. 26, 1998. The interview took place in Wellfleet, MA, and was conducted by Robert F. Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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

This is cassette number one.

ROBERT BROWN: Hello? This is an interview on July 9, 1998 with James Lechay at his house in Wellfleet, MA.

JAMES LECHAY: Well, I'm glad to be—

[Audio break.]

ROBERT BROWN: Well, Jim, I thought we could start out maybe to talk about your family, your background.

JAMES LECHAY: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You were born in New York but your parents had come from elsewhere.

JAMES LECHAY: They came from Russia. And my wife used to say they came from Lithuania because Russia kept changing from Russia to Lithuania. There's a 50-year period, and apparently, they came from, what was it—

ROBERT BROWN: Came from—

JAMES LECHAY: Not Vilna but—

ROBERT BROWN: Not Vilna.

JAMES LECHAY: —Kovno—

ROBERT BROWN: Kovno.

JAMES LECHAY: —which is Kaunas in Lithuania—

ROBERT BROWN: Kaunas in Lithuanian, yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: —but at that time it was Russia.

ROBERT BROWN: So in Russian it's Kovno.

JAMES LECHAY: In Russian. So not quite sure whether—

ROBERT BROWN: No.

JAMES LECHAY: —it's Russian or Lithuanian.

ROBERT BROWN: That was all part of the old czarist empire.

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, that's exactly so.

ROBERT BROWN: And they came over—

JAMES LECHAY: They came over here in 1905 and I was born in 1907. And I'm the only one in my family there who was born in this country.

ROBERT BROWN: Your older brother Myron was born in Russia.

JAMES LECHAY: Was born in Russia, or Lithuania, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: He was born in 1898. And he was my teacher, by the way, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: [00:02:00] Well, you—now, where were you born in New York? What district?

JAMES LECHAY: I was born—and I know the number at the house too was 1744 Washington Avenue, the Bronx—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: —which was an open area. And now of course it's part of the South Bronx, which is a slummy, terrible—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: —rundown place. But when I was there, it was quite lovely, quite beautiful, quite near Van Cortlandt Park. But, of course this is, I'm sorry to say, 91 years ago. [They laugh.]

ROBERT BROWN: I don't think you are sorry. [They laugh.]

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah. It was my birthday the other day.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it?

JAMES LECHAY: Ninety-one.

ROBERT BROWN: What are some early memories you have had?

JAMES LECHAY: What's that?

ROBERT BROWN: What are some early memories you had of growing up in the Bronx?

JAMES LECHAY: There are very few, except that I used to go and pet the cows, which were right there.

ROBERT BROWN: Ah, it was still semi-rural, I mean, where—

JAMES LECHAY: Yes, certainly, but now of course it's all cement and paved and so on.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: So I assume you went to school at about age six?

JAMES LECHAY: Exactly so. I went to school, had a kindergarten in school. And since I fell in love in Cortlandt—Van Cortlandt Park with a jack-in-the-pulpit flower—

ROBERT BROWN: A flower?

JAMES LECHAY: A flower.

ROBERT BROWN: Jack-in-the-pulpit, huh?

JAMES LECHAY: The class I was with simply went away and there I was alone, admiring this thing. But I was taken back home by a milk wagon and horse who found me.

ROBERT BROWN: [Laughs.]

JAMES LECHAY: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: [00:04:00] Well, do you suppose that was an early example of your interest in observation and natural forms?

JAMES LECHAY: No, I'd never thought of it that way. I just think that's what happened when I was a kid, and that's about it.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you think you were particularly interested in nature as a young boy?

JAMES LECHAY: I don't have any—

ROBERT BROWN: What were your interests, would you say, your chief interests?

JAMES LECHAY: I suppose like most kids I—you know, I grew up as a kid, whatever a kid does.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: You know? But then when I went to school I was involved in psychology and so on.

ROBERT BROWN: Psychology? Even in high school they would have done some of that?

JAMES LECHAY: In high school I kept drawing and so on, so—

ROBERT BROWN: So you did—

JAMES LECHAY: —but—

ROBERT BROWN: Later you did, I know. I wanted to ask that later.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: But in the same high school, did they have a fairly good program in art?

JAMES LECHAY: No. No, ordinary, I think. I think neglected, actually, but I was always interested in it, whatever they had, which was—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: —very inadequate, but whatever it was, I—

ROBERT BROWN: What was it mainly, copying things and—

JAMES LECHAY: Not really, no.

ROBERT BROWN: —making—

JAMES LECHAY: I never did, as a matter of fact, even at the—later on—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: —when I became more sophisticated, I copied at the Metropolitan Museum, as so many people did, and—testing my skill as a copyist. [00:06:00] Also I know the danger of that, but I did learn to look carefully—examine carefully the pictures so that if an elbow had to be turned or shown how to be turned, I tried to see how it was done, not to copy but to observe it. And so I learned a lot from that.

I also learned that I was a pretty skillful guy, but I don't believe that kind of skill is very valuable in painting, you know. I think what is much more valuable is what you have in yourself, your creative side, and work—and figure out all the problems yourself rather than copy the problems that are already before you.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. Important distinction, isn't it?

JAMES LECHAY: Well, it's quite a distinction.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. By the time you were copying at the Met, was your brother giving you advice?

JAMES LECHAY: My brother, yes, I was always working with him, and he was copying at the Met. Then of course I was at his studio a great deal. Now, this goes back a long time, you know. A long time ago I think this goes, back into the '20s—very early '30s and the late '20s. As a matter of fact, I was with him in 1929, maybe '30, I was at his studio.

ROBERT BROWN: At his studio.

JAMES LECHAY: At his studio.

ROBERT BROWN: So your brother Myron worked regularly as an artist.

JAMES LECHAY: Well, he was a painter who was well-known at that time, and a very good friend of Stuart Davis's. And they would work together, as a matter of fact, and they showed together. And he was my teacher. He was my teacher.

ROBERT BROWN: How did he—could you describe how he taught? What would be a typical—

JAMES LECHAY: He taught by making me [00:08:00]—insisted that I look carefully and observe and examine. It really opened my eyes to see that the sky isn't just in front of me but is on top and on both sides. I mean, the back—it's all over.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: So look carefully and it's amazing what is observation becomes acute with that attention, because mostly you look at many things and you don't see it at all. But I learned to see, and I see very well. Yeah. [Inaudible.] Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Would he take you around to meet his artist friends, things like that?

JAMES LECHAY: Our group of friends were artists at the time.

ROBERT BROWN: And you got—

JAMES LECHAY: And we worked on the streets of New York a great deal.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, you painted, right, or drew right there.

JAMES LECHAY: All the time, and went down to the canyons of New York and painted there. Every Sunday, for instance, we'd paint there, but otherwise always around the streets and so on. I needed the studio, of course. So it was very, very severe training.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: Very severe training, very—there weren't compliments, you know, idle compliments. If it was bad, it was bad, and we had to correct it and so on. And we learned. We learned a great deal.

ROBERT BROWN: So you say "we." Was there more than one person?

JAMES LECHAY: Well, it was me, but when I say "we" I think we—

ROBERT BROWN: In general, yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: —in general. That's what we did.

ROBERT BROWN: The great thing was then—or difficulty or problem was translating to a painting—

JAMES LECHAY: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —these acute powers of observation. Is that right? [00:10:00]

JAMES LECHAY: Well, I think—

ROBERT BROWN: How do you put onto canvas—

JAMES LECHAY: I think that you borrow things from the outside. You don't dismiss them. You borrow, but you also had to give something back. Now, you see the trees, you see the sky, you see the moon, and you see everything that—and it's great, but you can't just take that alone. You give part of yourself back to it. You can't just take it all. You've got to give it back. And that which you give back is terribly important. And I think if at all you're talented, this is what we'll decide on the worth of that picture, the quality of that picture or the quality of your talent. And this is a creative process. It has nothing to do with copying. One can copy and copy and copy and wind up with a lot of very skillful statements—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: —but aesthetically very dull and mechanical. I'm not interested in that. Am I clear?

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. Were you conscious that you were doing this, or are you today, that you're not only taking in—

JAMES LECHAY: [00:12:00] It's become so automatic with me that I find that the thing begins to look as though I am enslaved by the subject rather than being on top of it. I cannot be enslaved by the subject, but that subject has to be enslaved by me. Do you understand that?

ROBERT BROWN: Well put, yeah. Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: The other way around. I'm very conscious of it all the time. That's become almost automatic in my approach, so that anything beyond that becomes uninteresting and dull, tiresome, mechanical. It becomes boring. It's contrived and I'm not interested, no matter how skillful. That does not interest me at all. Yeah, and I think it's not good. I mean, for other people but not for me. I can't work along on that.

And also, by the way, no matter; I will borrow from everybody and anything. And in that way I'm kind of a thief. You know, I take everything. But, as I say, I've got to give something back. I do. And whatever I borrow, say, from Matisse, who I love, or Avery, who I love, or Picasso, who I love—these are all simple statements, but no matter how much I take from that, it's got to finally be me, my statement, totally mine, right? And I'll accept that.

ROBERT BROWN: As a very young man, were you pleased with what you were doing?

JAMES LECHAY: I've never been—you know, I'm always pleased. I thought I was doing some very good things, and I look at it in a few months and of course I couldn't understand why it was so bad—kind of sad—so it just kept changing. They weren't bad.

ROBERT BROWN: You were your own—you were your own most severe—

JAMES LECHAY: Critic, absolutely. [00:14:00] And I think finally I can only be my own critic—[inaudible]. And I think when people love something, they—you love it for the wrong reasons. They love it because it did something to them and touched something in their lives.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: They associate with it and so they love it. But that association—theirs is not mine. And they have a right to their association. They love it or—I can't change everything every time somebody doesn't like it or want it, or so on. So I've got to be my own critic, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, you were beginning your painting with your brother even while you were still in high school, that age. Is that right?

JAMES LECHAY: Well, in high school, no. I was not with my brother because I was in Joliet in the Middle West. My brother was in the East.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, you were in high school—you went—you had moved to Illinois.

JAMES LECHAY: Yes, but—yes, in Illinois—in Illinois, Joliet, IL. I lived with an aunt there, yeah. And then I went to the university—

ROBERT BROWN: Then you went to the university, where you—

JAMES LECHAY: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —did a degree, you said—told me, in psychology.

JAMES LECHAY: I took a degree in psychology, almost didn't get it. And I went on to graduate school, and just two weeks before to take my master's I quit before taking the degree. And they said to me—they had—the department said, "You're crazy. We want you here. You're doing very well." [00:16:00] I said, "No, I'm quitting." I was already teaching in the psychology department there as an assistant. And I said, "I'm going to New York. I'm a painter. I have to paint."

And when I got to New York, I got a letter from them saying, "We want you back. Are you sure you made the right decision?" And I wrote back and I said, "I'm quite sure I made the right decision," even though I came to New York right in the middle of the stock crash—

ROBERT BROWN: Yep, in 1929.

JAMES LECHAY: Exactly, so I was very broke.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you still have family in New York, where your—

JAMES LECHAY: I have family, yeah. And then I got a letter from the head of the department and he said, "Are you sure you'll stay, because I want you back." And I said, "No, I've decided definitely I'll stay." So I received another letter from him that said, "Since you're staying, would you please return the keys to the laboratory?" I was running rats through a maze in the psychology department.

ROBERT BROWN: Working with rats, yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: So—which I did, with apologies. I forgot all about the keys. I had the stopwatch, too, which I tested the rats.

ROBERT BROWN: Interesting. You mentioned to me also the importance to you, at the University of Illinois, of a Cosmopolitan Club. What was that about? Can you describe that? [00:18:00]

JAMES LECHAY: It was a fraternity of students from all over the world, all foreigners and so on. I was in that club. I was not in a Greek fraternity, not at all. I remember their slogan was, "Above all nations is humanity." I remember that very well. And when we were initiated, this is what we had to say. And then we became firm members of the club.

ROBERT BROWN: So it was a very liberal and humane group.

JAMES LECHAY: At that time not liberal enough. I tried at that time to have them open up the Cosmopolitan Club to admit black students, but there were several students from South Africa who would absolutely not permit any—you know, there was real prejudice. So I got into a lot of fights with them. Later on, they did admit them, but at that time they didn't. And this is what annoyed me with that Cosmopolitan Club, because I felt it was like International House, you know, in New York.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, yes.

JAMES LECHAY: But I didn't know whether at that time International House had blacks or not. I don't know if they—anyway this, I thought, was a great shortcoming.

ROBERT BROWN: But the Cosmopolitan Club provided you with much of your social life. Is that right?

JAMES LECHAY: Yes, of course. Yes, certainly.

ROBERT BROWN: Why did you—what was there in psychology that wasn't enough for you, that led you to—

JAMES LECHAY: I didn't want to teach. I didn't want to go and teach. [00:20:00] And I was always painting. I wanted to paint all the time.

ROBERT BROWN: You were?

JAMES LECHAY: I felt that this was a disservice. And that's exactly what I did. I started painting and working, worked very hard. And I felt I had something, but I felt I needed it. And that's what I did. And as a matter of fact, I almost did—was kicked out of school for lack of grades, because I concentrated only in drawing and painting and so on and let the other classes go. So I was almost thrown out of school, except that in art I always got A's.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, you're talking about college, now?

JAMES LECHAY: College. It saved me from being thrown out, and the fact also that later on I gave up taking my diploma, my degree, and they thought I was crazy. Later on, I did get a diploma but I got an honorary doctorate degree. So I feel sort of vindicated over that.

ROBERT BROWN: But you must have done pretty well in psychology as well.

JAMES LECHAY: I did very well there. It's what kept me in school.

ROBERT BROWN: But you found the prospect of just going on to teaching wasn't exciting—

JAMES LECHAY: Well, it wasn't for me.

ROBERT BROWN: —compared to painting.

JAMES LECHAY: It wasn't for me.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: And I was already teaching as an assistant and it wasn't for me. I wanted to paint.

ROBERT BROWN: What was it? Did it bore you or—

JAMES LECHAY: No, I just felt I wanted to paint. No, it didn't bore me. I found it most interesting and all, but I wanted to paint.

ROBERT BROWN: At that time were you mainly going out and painting from nature or from things you saw?  
[00:22:00]

JAMES LECHAY: I was working from nature, from the outside. And I tried to work from inside too, but mostly from outside.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, did people like—you mentioned your brother's friend, Stuart Davis. Did they ever comment on your work or talk to you about what you—

JAMES LECHAY: I think they liked what I was doing.

ROBERT BROWN: But you don't ever remember their actively—only your brother actively taught you.

JAMES LECHAY: Well, yeah, because my brother and I were very good friends. And Stuart Davis would come to the house a great deal and we would see them.

ROBERT BROWN: Your brother was about nine years older than you.

JAMES LECHAY: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: He was.

JAMES LECHAY: Right, he would be now 101—100. So all this goes back—

ROBERT BROWN: You got to New York, then, in 1929, and you returned to try to make it as a painter—

JAMES LECHAY: Right, the stock crash. And I was really broke.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: But I was very good dancer. I was a very good dancer.

ROBERT BROWN: And so?

JAMES LECHAY: And so there was an advertisement for Arthur Murray. I thought I'd go over and answer the call. And a great many people showed up to perform for them.

ROBERT BROWN: The great who?

JAMES LECHAY: Many people—

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, yes.

JAMES LECHAY: —showed up to get a job teaching dance. And so they gave me a very beautiful young woman to dance with, you know, testing me. And all these people were knocked out but I was retained. So I taught for a while.

ROBERT BROWN: And that kind of gave you a bit of an income.

JAMES LECHAY: To pay my rent. [00:24:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: But not for very long because they thought I was a homo.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, and this is Arthur Murray. It's okay. It paid my rent. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have a room and studio? What was your setup?

JAMES LECHAY: I had a—De Hirsh Margules and I—De Hirsh was a painter and friend of my brother's, and I thought he was very—and so we had a studio. And he was a newspaper reporter and he would—

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, Margules, yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: —report to the various courtrooms for news. And then in the daytime he would paint, and at night go around to the various courthouses and pick up the—and telephone his editor for the news, yeah. So, yeah, that was—



ROBERT BROWN: So you—hmm?

JAMES LECHAY: No—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: —he's all gone. All these people are gone.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. So you kept going right through this time.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you making other acquaintances among artists? You knew De Hirsh Margules and you roomed with him.

JAMES LECHAY: Well, De Hirsh I've known since 1920 through my brother. He wasn't much older than I anyway.

ROBERT BROWN: And then who were some of the others?

JAMES LECHAY: Well, Milton Avery.

ROBERT BROWN: You got to know him at this time?

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, I've got a portrait I did just recently. Oh, yes, Milton, you bet, and Gottlieb and all these people. And then I got on a project—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, a little bit later.

JAMES LECHAY: —a little later, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: The first year or so, then, I guess—

JAMES LECHAY: The first year was very rough, and actually I danced all—do you know who Maurice Schwartz was [00:26:00]—Maurice Schwartz?

ROBERT BROWN: No.

JAMES LECHAY: The Jewish theater?

ROBERT BROWN: No.

JAMES LECHAY: The actor in—yeah, wonderful Jewish—what do you call it? The Yiddish Art Theater.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, sure.

JAMES LECHAY: The Jewish Art Theater on 2nd Avenue. So I painted sets for him. [Inaudible] what's his name—sets. And *Yoshe Kalb*, I remember this, had Rothschild millions, another play of that Maurice Schwartz. Do you know who Jacob Adler was?

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES LECHAY: Well, he was a disciple of Jacob Adler, you know, and Stella Adler and Luther Adler. That's the whole family. So I did his sets there, painted them day and night, day and night working on them and then trying to paint.

ROBERT BROWN: Did they paint—did they pay very well?

JAMES LECHAY: Beautifully. They painted beautifully.

ROBERT BROWN: But did you make much—

JAMES LECHAY: Maurice Schwartz, after fighting and fighting and fighting he finally gave me \$25. [Laughs.] Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you do this for a while, this painting of sets?

JAMES LECHAY: I didn't have a job. I needed it.

ROBERT BROWN: Sure, you needed—and then you'd paint—so you were keeping very long hours, weren't you?

JAMES LECHAY: Sure.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. Now, those paintings you were doing, were you then taking them around to show to art galleries?

JAMES LECHAY: No, I didn't do that at all. But De Hirsh Margules, who had the Artists Gallery—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, he had a gallery.

JAMES LECHAY: He started a place called Another Place.

ROBERT BROWN: Another Place.

JAMES LECHAY: And I had a show there. It was on 8th Street. And it was a very interesting show. [00:28:00] At that time the Mexican painter—not Rivera but—

ROBERT BROWN: Orozco?

JAMES LECHAY: Not Orozco, the other one.

ROBERT BROWN: Siqueiros?

JAMES LECHAY: Siqueiros, yeah, came to New York because he was insisting—playing with the idea of Duco, you know. And people used Duco because they knew the outside would fade and so on, because—

ROBERT BROWN: Right.

JAMES LECHAY: And Duco, which is a paint that they painted automobiles with, Duco paint, he wanted them to use Duco and started to introduce Duco. And so he came up to my show and loved it very much. And I thought, this is a white lie, but I accepted it anyway.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, he said this to you or to the—

JAMES LECHAY: My paintings. Yeah, to me and to the paintings. And I still have one of those paintings. [Inaudible]—1936.

ROBERT BROWN: Uh-huh. And you thought it was sort of a—he was not telling you the truth?

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah. No, I just felt, how could he like it so much?

ROBERT BROWN: But he did. He said he did.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah. And that was very interesting. So I've always loved Siqueiros as a result. [They laugh.]

ROBERT BROWN: I see, yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you ever get—did you ever see him again?

JAMES LECHAY: I never did.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. At that time there was a—

JAMES LECHAY: 1936.

ROBERT BROWN: This was '36, that first show. That's more or less your first.

JAMES LECHAY: That was my first show.

ROBERT BROWN: At that time, Alma Reed had her Delphic Studio gallery, which did show a lot of those Mexicans. Do you recall that gallery at all?

JAMES LECHAY: No, but I did go—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. Well, you came—you told me you came first to Provincetown more or less at the end of that first year back in New York, 1930. You said you went—

JAMES LECHAY: Exactly so.

ROBERT BROWN: You came here with a man—with a friend, I guess, Max Bodenheimer [ph].

JAMES LECHAY: You know who Max Bodenheim was?

ROBERT BROWN: Well, tell about him.

JAMES LECHAY: Well, he was a very fine poet, number one [00:30:00]—very handsome, very fine poet, who drank a great deal certainly. And I was very good friend of his wife, Minna, Minna Bodenheim.

ROBERT BROWN: Minna.

JAMES LECHAY: And whenever Max would get in trouble, he would rush to see Minna. And they were not living together but they were still friends. And they had a son, Solbert.

ROBERT BROWN: She was back in Germany.

JAMES LECHAY: No, no, no.

ROBERT BROWN: No.

JAMES LECHAY: This is right in New York. And later on, he was murdered, along with the girl he was living with, Helen [ph]—oh, names, names, names.

ROBERT BROWN: That's all right.

JAMES LECHAY: And some man—crazy man who's still, I suppose, in one of the upstate prisons—murdered him and said, "You communists"—came in and stabbed them both—killed them both. Terrible. But he was very famous. He's in all the books and all the anthologies and so on. And any Villager would know who Max Bodenheim was anyway.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, you mean any Greenwich Villager.

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, sure. And go beyond Greenwich Village, go beyond that, but—

ROBERT BROWN: Sure. Oh, by the way, were you living in that area?

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you living in the Village?

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah. And he—oh, what was I going to say?

ROBERT BROWN: Well, we were talking about you coming out—

JAMES LECHAY: He became terribly drunk and terribly filthy, a lost person, you know, I guess. He just went way, way down. [00:32:00] And the strange thing, he was on the WPA a little bit later on, sloppy and filthy and impossibly dirty and impossible in every way. When he turned in his manuscripts, they were very closely written, neat as a pin—neat and clean as a—this fantastic—this contradiction all the way through that. But then he was murdered.

ROBERT BROWN: When you first came down here, did you come to Provincetown with him to paint or just to—thinking you might spend the summer here or—

JAMES LECHAY: Let me see what the—when I first came to Provincetown? I came to Provincetown—by the way, I got to Provincetown by hitching rides from New York. I didn't have any money. Yes, wait a minute. Wait a minute. How did this work? I got a job before the WPA started. I was doing a mural in a church, Catholic church somewhere. And the mural—they gave me a card. It was a card of Joan of Arc going into Paris.

ROBERT BROWN: They gave you a card?

JAMES LECHAY: A card about this big—

ROBERT BROWN: You mean to give you an idea—

JAMES LECHAY: —about this big.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, that you were to model your mural on that illustration.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, it was Joan of Arc going into Paris. And so I was working on this portrait. And this is called, I think, an EWB, [00:34:00] Emergency Works Bureau. And I got \$18 every two weeks. One week you worked and the other week you're off. Then the third week you're given the \$18. And this went on for—with that I saved \$25 and bummed to Provincetown. And I got a studio at Shank Painter Road.

ROBERT BROWN: Shank Painter Road.

JAMES LECHAY: The house is still there. It's all done and it's all different, but there's a sawmill down below. And I saw that it was large place—[inaudible]—and I went in and asked them for it. And he said, "You can't stay here. I've got the sawmill going here. I get up at five in the morning usually in the summer." I said, "I don't mind." So I said, "How much is it?" He said, "You can have it \$25 for the whole summer." [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: And?

JAMES LECHAY: So I gave him the \$25 and that's what I had. And I went down to the docks and got fish from the fishermen—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: —yeah, because they were throwing it overboard. It didn't pay them to ship the fish out, so I got—so I lived on fish that summer, I would say, but I did paint. And I painted the old lighthouse, the old icehouse in—which is now a big apartment place. And that's what it was. So it was all right. So I made about \$25 on that painting.

ROBERT BROWN: You were able to sell it that summer?

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, that's how I got it. [00:36:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: My friend looked at it and said—came up to the studio and she said, "How much is that?" And I was so embarrassed. So she said, "All right, never mind. Just write it down on a piece of paper. If it's too much, I'll tell you." [Inaudible.] And this was Sonia Gordon Brown. I remember that.

ROBERT BROWN: Sonia?

JAMES LECHAY: She's a sculptor—Gordon Brown. So I wrote down \$25. She said, "It's fine." [They laugh.] So there's my first painting.

ROBERT BROWN: So it seemed to have been worthwhile to come up here.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Was it very—were there many other artists that summer of 1930, do you recall?

JAMES LECHAY: Well, you know, you can't change the ocean and the streets had no pavement on them.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, but were there a number of other young artists?

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, there was a man they called Hans Hofmann—oh, it wasn't Hans Hofmann—not Hans Hofmann—not this Hofmann, another one. And as a matter of fact, at that time, Jack—was it Jack Tworkov or Gottlieb? —I think Jack Pfeiffer [ph].

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, yes, there was someone named Pfeiffer [ph].

JAMES LECHAY: Pfeiffer [ph], that's his sister, or—no.

ROBERT BROWN: Well—

JAMES LECHAY: That's another group who had a studio—something—I forget anyway. Anyway, there were a number of artists that—[00:38:00] and it was a fishing town, not for cod fishing, but for mackerel and throw it into the nets. And we'd go out and—

ROBERT BROWN: Out here in the harbor, in the bay.

JAMES LECHAY: Yes. We'd go in there and help the fishermen—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: —draw in the nets and get fishes out of it. And that's what I drew.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you pretty productive that first trip here?

JAMES LECHAY: I was very productive. I worked very hard.

ROBERT BROWN: So you evidently had enough money where you brought your own supplies with you up from New York, I guess, your canvases and paints.

JAMES LECHAY: I don't remember what happened, how that happened. I don't remember how that happened. I know I used to prepare my own canvases and so on. And I did, at that time, a lot of watercolors. Now, I was pretty broke, and then of course got on to the—later on the WPA. So I—

ROBERT BROWN: You've mentioned the WPA quite a bit. Was that a good thing, in your estimation?

JAMES LECHAY: It saved my life, as it did many others.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: You bet. As a matter of fact, I spoke about that whole period. And I've got a tape of it somewhere. My VCR was broken and it's being repaired.

ROBERT BROWN: You've talked about it, yes.

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, did you hear that tape? You did hear that tape.

ROBERT BROWN: I don't think I have, but let me just ask you here then, you were in the easel painting part of the federal project.

JAMES LECHAY: The easel project. And what we had to do is to turn in one painting every three months. I talk about this on one of the tapes there. I gave a rather nice talk about it at the—

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, we can put it down here too, though.

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, did I?

ROBERT BROWN: No, no, let's talk about it here, just briefly.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: So every few months you had to turn in a painting.[00:40:00]

JAMES LECHAY: I'd turn in a painting.

ROBERT BROWN: Meanwhile, you were given a regular salary, weren't you, or—

JAMES LECHAY: Twenty-three eighty-six [dollars].

ROBERT BROWN: Twenty-three eighty-six [dollars]?

JAMES LECHAY: That's the magic number.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

JAMES LECHAY: Twenty-three eighty-six [dollars] was the salary we got out of the WPA.

ROBERT BROWN: And that was a monthly—

JAMES LECHAY: A week.

ROBERT BROWN: A weekly salary.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: So you were—

JAMES LECHAY: Twenty-three eighty-six [dollars].

ROBERT BROWN: You had gone up a bit, yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: Right. Well—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: —she was born on that salary, 1936—1936. Yeah, she was born on that salary.

ROBERT BROWN: So you were married by then too?

JAMES LECHAY: Well, that's also a little difficult. I was married after she was born—

ROBERT BROWN: Oh.

JAMES LECHAY: —years after that.

ROBERT BROWN: So you were a—

JAMES LECHAY: Yes, so she was a little bastard child. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: You were a very sociable—you were a very sociable person, right, as you are now? [They laugh.] Honestly. [Laughs.] [Inaudible]—you said you'd spent other time, I guess in the '30s—occasionally you went to Gloucester and to Rockport.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, to Rockport and I painted. I painted. You bet.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you just sort of learn—hear by word of mouth that those were nice places to paint, or did you have friends or—

JAMES LECHAY: I think people went there in the summertime. We either went to Rockport or to Gloucester and then to Oxford. I did a lot of work there.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah. We were always bumming up there, however. Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: In Greenwich Village, then, that was your base of operations, wasn't it?

JAMES LECHAY: Right. I was usually all over Greenwich Village.

ROBERT BROWN: Could you live pretty cheaply there during the 1930s?

JAMES LECHAY: One of the reasons for everybody running out of the village—artists running to Provincetown early on [00:42:00]—was because as artists gathered and started working there, tourists started coming in and prices went up and became very expensive. And then we kept moving. And that's the way things happened in all the colonies.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, yes.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, that's what happens. That's what happened there.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: It's not unusual. That's what happens.

ROBERT BROWN: So you too had to leave the Village after a certain point, or did you stay there—

JAMES LECHAY: No, I was very cynical about leaving the Village. I loved the Village, and the reason I left the Village is because we moved to Hong Kong. I was invited—

ROBERT BROWN: Hong Kong?

JAMES LECHAY: I was invited to teach at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

ROBERT BROWN: How did that come about?

JAMES LECHAY: Let me get these dates right. See, this goes back again. I was at—I was invited—oh, I see. I was

invited to come to Iowa to teach in Iowa—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, that was in—

JAMES LECHAY: —in 1945, all right. And we were living in the Village. We were living on One King Street in the Village at that time. I got to Iowa—after turning the job down, I was invited to come in 1944 and I turned it down. Then in 1945—oh, yes, this is what happened. [00:44:00] I'd been showing my work and getting a lot of prizes. And the Chicago Art Institute gave me a prize, along with Ivan Le Lorraine Albright and Max Weber.

ROBERT BROWN: And this was what year?

JAMES LECHAY: Nineteen—

ROBERT BROWN: Forties?

JAMES LECHAY: I've got it all in here. It was '42, I think. And so I was working very hard, and then I got a telegram to come out to Iowa and I turned it down. I said, "What do you want?" And the next year again I got the telegram, would I come? And this time, well, I said, let's try it for a year, see what it is. And so we went out there. That's when I went to Iowa—left the Village and went to Iowa.

And from Iowa, I taught for a while and I had some graduate students, and John Li, who came from Hong Kong to study, who was teaching at the University of Hong Kong, a professor there, came to—said he'd take a further degree at Iowa. And he came and he was my assistant in Iowa. And when he got back—after years, when he got back to Hong Kong—and I retired in 1970, later on—I got—I wrote to him and said I'm now retired and—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: And so, he said, "Well, if you have to come this way, will you stop in?"

ROBERT BROWN: So this was many years later.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah. At that point I went to Hong Kong—[00:46:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: —to teach there.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, I'd like to ask you about some of your earlier teaching, your—let me just flip this. Then I'll ask you about earlier teaching.

JAMES LECHAY: That was in San Francisco at—

ROBERT BROWN: Let me flip—

[END TAPE 1 SIDE A.]

ROBERT BROWN: So you were on the WPA project, according to this old résumé, from 1938 to 1940.

JAMES LECHAY: Nineteen thirty-eight—

ROBERT BROWN: To 1940.

JAMES LECHAY: In WPA?

ROBERT BROWN: And then—

JAMES LECHAY: No, I was there earlier than 1938.

ROBERT BROWN: Okay, well, this is—I'm just—

JAMES LECHAY: It was 1934.

ROBERT BROWN: Ah. So this is simply a résumé that you put together.

JAMES LECHAY: Oh.

ROBERT BROWN: But then you say from about 1940 onward you were teaching painting in your studio.

JAMES LECHAY: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: So you were becoming a teacher. That's what I wanted to ask about, how you got started as a teacher.

JAMES LECHAY: I was broke again. And I was working in the studio and I was—my reputation was growing but I still needed to pay rent, and so I took a few students in my studio, never artists in that—like Sol Wilson took—you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Sol Wilson?

JAMES LECHAY: Do you know Sol?

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES LECHAY: Well, he's a good friend and we had studios next to each other in the same building.

ROBERT BROWN: So did you find that you liked to teach?

JAMES LECHAY: I found that whenever I had good students I liked it.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: If I didn't I found it difficult, you know. That is, I gave them what I could, but I thought it was much more rewarding if I found there was talent and so on. And I had some very good students.

ROBERT BROWN: So that's—

JAMES LECHAY: And then I'd say I was invited to Iowa.

ROBERT BROWN: This was in the mid-'40s.

JAMES LECHAY: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: I gave up my studio in New York—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: —and went to Iowa. [00:02:00] And then from Iowa, a few years later, yes, I was invited to teach at Palo Alto and Stanford—

ROBERT BROWN: And other—

JAMES LECHAY: —then at NYU in New York, and many workshops all over.

ROBERT BROWN: So we'll ask about those.

JAMES LECHAY: Many workshops.

ROBERT BROWN: But when you left—the decision to leave New York, because you—that was a big decision—

JAMES LECHAY: It certainly was. It took us a long time to make this decision. As I say, I turned down a job one year then I took it the next, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Because in New York—I wanted to ask a couple of other things. You told me at one point that you—for example, the Museum of Modern Art, when that was getting started—

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, you know, I never showed at the Museum of Modern Art, but I showed time and time and time again at the Whitney Museum when they were on Eighth Street—[inaudible]. And I'll show you a review, which I think is rather interesting and very telling.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, we'll get to that.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: But do you remember—when the MoMA started, it was in an office building. You said you remembered that. Was the interest there? Could you go look at modern European work?

JAMES LECHAY: That first show the Museum of Modern Art ever had in this country, when it was Alfred Barr who



started it in the first place, was at the museum on Fifth Avenue and, I think, 56th Street or 57th Street at the Heckscher Building. And he would show—the first show that the Museum of Modern Art had was at the Heckscher Building before there was a museum. And they showed Cezanne [00:04:00]—let's see, Matisse and Cezanne, Derain, and one more. And I was fascinated and—I guess fascinated by that show upstairs there.

ROBERT BROWN: Was that—

JAMES LECHAY: And then later on they had—you know, they moved to 53rd or 54th Street or something, in the brownstone building and then later on to the museum that they built.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. Was that view about the first you had of modern French painting?

JAMES LECHAY: Not at all, no.

ROBERT BROWN: No, you had seen it elsewhere?

JAMES LECHAY: Because I was invited many times—every Friday evening at the Baroness Hilla Rebay.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, yes.

JAMES LECHAY: Do you remember her?

ROBERT BROWN: Yep, of the Guggenheim.

JAMES LECHAY: Right. Now, I had—and she was the non-objective—the museum of non-objective art, you know. So I'd drive to her place and I'd stay for tea. And the first time I'd ever seen, at the Guggenheim, which was—it was Peggy Guggenheim and Hilla Rebay.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: You know who that was?

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, yes, she was the curator, right, of the Museum of Non-Objective Painting.

JAMES LECHAY: Right, right, right. Yeah, I'm getting so confused.

ROBERT BROWN: No.

JAMES LECHAY: She had on the wall a Modigliani, not just that but a nude. I was knocked over. So I was really being introduced to—and I've known Modigliani, [00:06:00] I've known the work, but I never saw a nude. And of course the Museum of Non-Objective—and Hilla Rebay had never shown any—it was always non-objective. You remember that.

And then you had the Daniel Gallery and all the other galleries, and I went constantly to the galleries on a Friday morning, a Friday—and that was the artists' time in the galleries.

ROBERT BROWN: Was Friday.

JAMES LECHAY: Friday, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: The Daniel Gallery, do you remember the Daniel Gallery? Can you describe—do you have any memories of it?

JAMES LECHAY: I remember it because I thought it was a very progressive gallery, and I showed—where did I see—Avery, I knew before that anyway. I knew Sally [ph] and Grace [ph].

ROBERT BROWN: You knew them.

JAMES LECHAY: And Milton, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Was Milton Avery an interesting and open person?

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, I thought he was a wonderful man, yeah. I have a portrait of—he came and he sat for me. I have it in the studio.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, the Whitney Museum then was open to showing young work.

JAMES LECHAY: On Eighth Street. They were on Eighth Street.

ROBERT BROWN: You mentioned that you had shows there pretty—very early.

JAMES LECHAY: Time and time and time again.

ROBERT BROWN: Pretty early.

JAMES LECHAY: Every year.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, I've got an article that Henry McBride wrote.

ROBERT BROWN: Okay.

JAMES LECHAY: I've got that here.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, we'll go over that.

JAMES LECHAY: Okay.

ROBERT BROWN: But they were pretty open then to showing young, promising talent, the Whitney was.

JAMES LECHAY: I've never had—[00:08:00] I've never had a problem of showing places or getting—having a gallery represent me, but I know now people do scramble for it and having a rough time, you know. I know that and how difficult it is for a lot of people to get galleries.

ROBERT BROWN: But not for you. You did have rather smooth sailing.

JAMES LECHAY: I was at Feragil for a long time.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: At Feragil, Macbeth, Kraushaar and Norlyst Gallery, and so on. Do you remember the Norlyst Gallery, Eleanore Lust and—what was his name? Max Ernst's son.

ROBERT BROWN: Okay. Jimmy?

JAMES LECHAY: Jimmy Ernst.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: Jimmy Ernst and Eleanore Lust ran a gallery called the Norlyst Gallery. I had a show with them. And I remember going up one time to the gallery and there was Jimmy. And he said to me—you know, he and his father didn't get on at all. He and Max Ernst didn't get on at all. And he said to me—[inaudible]—another about Max Ernst or those people—

[Cross talk.]

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, yes, he said that the first time, when he was doing the prints—oh, I forget it, anyway.

ROBERT BROWN: Okay.

JAMES LECHAY: [Inaudible]—there, saying, "My father is absolutely wrong, and"—

ROBERT BROWN: Oh. They didn't—

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: —weren't close, yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: [00:10:00] Well, you had—you were having regularly, as you said, shows at Feragil artist gallery, and other places, your first—

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And then in '44, according to this, you had a show at the Findlay Gallery in Chicago.

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, yes, that was very unsuccessful. The only bad review I ever got was at the Findlay Gallery. And I've got that review too.

ROBERT BROWN: Okay.

JAMES LECHAY: I save everything.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, we'll look at those later—

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, okay.

ROBERT BROWN: —when I look at the photos of your work.

JAMES LECHAY: And the galleries, I forget them now, but they're all in there.

ROBERT BROWN: And then you showed regularly in various public places and museums.

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, yes. Yes, many, many times.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. Yeah, including the New York World's Fair 1939.

JAMES LECHAY: Nineteen thirty-nine, you bet I was there. You bet. As a matter of fact, it's very interesting because the sculptors brought their—you know, the World's Fair was built on a[n] old garbage dump, you know that—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: —out there. And the sculptors would bring in their big, heavy sculptures, and the next morning all they saw were the heads. [They laugh.] I remember that. Oh, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Various other friends you mentioned having in New York—then we'll talk about Iowa—Abraham Walkowitz—

JAMES LECHAY: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —a good friend, wasn't he?

JAMES LECHAY: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: What was he like?

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, I did many portraits of him.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: I have one of his dancers, you know, Isadora, you know, Isadora Duncan. He's a wonderful guy. As a matter of fact, I did have—one of the portraits I gave to Cedar Rapids—Coe College in Cedar Rapids—

ROBERT BROWN: Iowa.

JAMES LECHAY: —because when I went to look at a show there, and suddenly I see a whole row of Walkowitz paintings. [00:12:00] So I said, "Would you like a Walkowitz?" They'd love it. So I gave them a head, I think, of Walkowitz. They loved it.

Then I got a letter from them that said, "You know, you could take this off your income tax." I said, "I never thought about these things anyway." He said, "Yes." And I said, "Well, how much can I take—or how much?" And so he said, "Oh, I don't know, about \$400." That was a lot of money then. So then we got a letter from the income tax people, who said, "You've got something—you have \$400. You took this off a painting," you know? And Rose was involved in this.

ROBERT BROWN: Your wife, yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, because they came to audit. And so she said, "Well, that's what it's worth." And they said, "Well, nobody just gets \$400 this way."

ROBERT BROWN: You mean nobody gets a deduction—

JAMES LECHAY: A deduction.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: Anyway, there was an argument there, and we got the deduction.

ROBERT BROWN: So that was—

JAMES LECHAY: But that gave me a lot of trouble. That portrait gave me a lot of trouble.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. [00:14:00] Well, Walkowitz was a very wide—had very wide acquaintance among artists, didn't he?

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, he was wonderful—a wonderful man, wonderful man.

ROBERT BROWN: You've mentioned also people like the Soyer brothers. You knew them well.

JAMES LECHAY: Very well indeed.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. Had you known them—

JAMES LECHAY: I've got photographs of—

ROBERT BROWN: Had you known them since the 1920s or so?

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, a long time, a long time. They were twins, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh.

JAMES LECHAY: And then the third one, Isaac, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: But Raphael and Moses—

JAMES LECHAY: Were twins.

ROBERT BROWN: —you knew better.

JAMES LECHAY: I know very well.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: Moses and I shared a studio for a while. Oh, yes, they're great.

ROBERT BROWN: You said also you knew Alfred Stieglitz.

JAMES LECHAY: Yes. What happened was I'd go up to American Place—that's the name of his gallery there—and he'd always have wonderful shows. And one time I remember he was wearing this long cape, and was having great difficulty. I took him up to the gallery. And he had a bed in the back of that gallery where he could like down when he was there.

ROBERT BROWN: So he was ill, was it?

JAMES LECHAY: Old, yeah. But I did meet Hartley up there.

ROBERT BROWN: Marsden Hartley.

JAMES LECHAY: Marsden Hartley at Stieglitz's. And I saw—I never met Marin but I watched Marin work on one of his frames.

ROBERT BROWN: Did Hartley talk with you quite a bit?

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: How would you characterize him based on that?

JAMES LECHAY: Well, he was certainly homosexual and loved me for that reason, you know, but nothing ever happened there. [00:16:00] However, he and—we were very good friends.

ROBERT BROWN: So Hartley, you saw him—met him only that one time then?

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, I saw him many times.

ROBERT BROWN: Many times.

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, sure. Oh, sure. Well, he was part of the American Place.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, and that was a place where you would go to—

JAMES LECHAY: [Inaudible.]

ROBERT BROWN: Those Fridays when—

JAMES LECHAY: Stieglitz was wonderful. You know, he would not sell to anybody, though. You had to prove to him—anybody who bought anything had to prove that he loved the work, you know?

ROBERT BROWN: You're speaking now of Stieglitz.

JAMES LECHAY: Of Stieglitz.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. Did he talk to you quite a bit? Was he—

JAMES LECHAY: Well, he was always—you know, we talked a great deal but always he felt so disappointed in people. That he wasn't getting the right response, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh. So was he rather pessimistic?

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, but he was wonderful.

ROBERT BROWN: What way was he wonderful, in your experience?

JAMES LECHAY: Well, look at what he did.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, sure.

JAMES LECHAY: He started with nothing and he built up—he introduced Picasso. He introduced everybody from a place called 291, I think it was called.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, that's right.

JAMES LECHAY: Am I right, 291?

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, way, way back. And he had a rough time.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, but for you—

JAMES LECHAY: But I've never met his wife.

ROBERT BROWN: Georgia O'Keefe.

JAMES LECHAY: I've never met her. [00:18:00]

ROBERT BROWN: But for you, did he lecture you, would he, or give you advice?

JAMES LECHAY: No, he didn't lecture me. He just talked openly, very nicely. We weren't intimate but I saw him many, many times.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. You did get to know, in those days, Arshile Gorky.

JAMES LECHAY: As a matter of fact, I have—my first taste of yogurt is because of Arshile. And I don't know if I told you so or not what happened, did I?

ROBERT BROWN: I don't know. Let's put it down.

JAMES LECHAY: We ran into each other at Madison Square and—

ROBERT BROWN: Union Square?

JAMES LECHAY: The Village, not Union.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, the Village—Washington Square.

JAMES LECHAY: Washington Square.

ROBERT BROWN: Right.

JAMES LECHAY: And he said, "Come on, sit down. I want to talk to you." And he was carrying a book under his arm. Now, Arshile Gorky was the most arrogant person I've ever known.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, really?

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, my heaven's sake, fantastically arrogant and sometimes impossible, but such a contradiction again. He was carrying a book under his arm like that.

ROBERT BROWN: A pretty big book, huh?

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, under his—well, you know. And not, you know—and he said, "Come on, sit down. I want to talk to you." So he said, "You know, I wish that, when I am 80, I could draw like this man did when he was 12." [00:20:00] He had the drawings of—[inaudible]. And I thought that was such a modest thing for this arrogant, impossible—yeah, when he came to the real, you know—that nothing else mattered.

He and Stuart Davis were very, very close friends—very close friends. And he would say that, "Stuart is number one and I am number two." Then they had a fight, a big, nasty fight, and Stuart became number two—[they laugh]—and he became number one.

ROBERT BROWN: Ah.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, but he died of cancer, you know, by then.

ROBERT BROWN: Davis?

JAMES LECHAY: Cancer.

ROBERT BROWN: Cancer.

JAMES LECHAY: No, not Davis, Gorky.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, I thought he died—

JAMES LECHAY: He died of cancer of the rectum.

ROBERT BROWN: I thought he died of suicide.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, he died because of that.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, he was in bad shape.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, he had that and he committed suicide.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you think his arrogance was matched by his quality? Or what do you think of his career, his accomplishments?

JAMES LECHAY: I've always felt something about Gorky. I thought he was very, very good. I also felt that he had come to his own completely and he died too quickly, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: He committed suicide in Connecticut, you know, but he had this cancer of the rectum and he wouldn't stay with it.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: [00:22:00] And I always felt that—I felt—Picasso first and then Gorky, and it should be the other way around. You understand what I mean?

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: It's what I talked about earlier, that you've got to be yourself no matter what. But he was very,

very good. And I think also this—now, I may be absolutely wrong about this. I don't think I'm wrong, but I think I might be, that his—first of all, he had a lot of fires in the studio, his studio, and lost a lot of work. And then there's this suicide. And how rough can a time be? And he was a very good friend at that time.

So there was a lot of publicity about Stuart Davis, about Gorky, about the whole group. They were very high up there. And so there was a lot of, you know, newspaper talk. You know, this is newsworthy stuff at that time. He was very popular. And I felt that a lot of his reputation came not only through the talent, because lots of people were very talented, but through the dramatic things that happened to him. And it was very newsworthy. I may be wrong. It may not be very charitable, but I have always felt that.

And I liked—I like Arshile. [00:24:00] As a matter of fact, he took me up to the Armenian section, which is about 24th Street in New York—23rd, 24th—28th Street, and introduced me to yogurt, the first time I ever tasted yogurt. It has some very good yogurt. I didn't think it was so great but it was fine anyway. [They laugh.] Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: So he was someone you—despite his arrogance, could you actually have a decent conversation?

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, I liked him.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: I liked him.

ROBERT BROWN: But I mean, you could talk back and forth?

JAMES LECHAY: I was at his studio—you know, what can—I was so broke. Boy, I was really broke. And I was in his studio, and he had his studio at 42 Union Square for a long time. Now the big apartment buildings are there. And I was up there with somebody, and here's Gorky painting a live scene. He used this tube of cobalt blue. And he—I mean, the canvas, this tube of cobalt—

ROBERT BROWN: He just took the tube and put it on the canvas?

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, squirted it.

ROBERT BROWN: Squirted it.

JAMES LECHAY: And he took it all and he went whoosh. I said, "You bastard! How the hell could you do that?"

ROBERT BROWN: He said that?

JAMES LECHAY: I said it.

ROBERT BROWN: You said it, why would he destroy—

JAMES LECHAY: With all this paint—he'd lose all this paint. I was dying to get some paint.

ROBERT BROWN: You were so broke, yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: I said, "I'm broke." And I'm sure he did that just out of arrogance. That's the point. Yeah, that's crazy.

[00:26:00] You know, one of the early—prior to the tragic—he was teaching in the Bronx and I was—and we were sent around to teach someone. And he said, "You know, I tell these people that Cezanne was born in 1912." And he says this all wrong, all the—I said, "What do you want to do that for? These people are trying to learn something." He said, "Oh, the hell with them." It's arrogance. It's sheer arrogance, you know, like I said.

ROBERT BROWN: And yet he was a—in some ways he was likable to you. Is that right?

JAMES LECHAY: What?

ROBERT BROWN: You liked him also.

JAMES LECHAY: I liked him in spite of all that.

ROBERT BROWN: Despite that.

JAMES LECHAY: I don't know. It's crazy, but I liked him.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. Well, another guy with personality quirks—you mentioned you served on an art jury with him—was Pollock, Jackson Pollock.

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, yes, indeed.

ROBERT BROWN: You were more or less condemning some contemporaries.

JAMES LECHAY: No, we worked together on the project, and Gottlieb and—

ROBERT BROWN: And Adolph Gottlieb?

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Can you talk a little bit about them? What were they like to work with?

JAMES LECHAY: Well, you know, we had this—we'd meet to get salaries and so—

ROBERT BROWN: And that's all?

JAMES LECHAY: And we'd show—would have a show. And I know that one time Jack said to me—one time he says, "Well, what happened to you? Where were you? Why didn't you go further?" You know, meaning why didn't I start dripping, I suppose. But he started dripping much later on.

ROBERT BROWN: But he was asking you why you didn't—

JAMES LECHAY: Why I didn't go further. He liked my work—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: —but it wasn't enough, [00:28:00] you see, what I—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: Anyway, that was it. But he was okay. I liked him. And we were in a book together. I talked about a certain book of Jackson Pollock. He talks about the *Momentum* show, which he and Max Weber and I were the jurors. And we got along beautifully, wonderfully, and I liked him very much. We had lunch. It was very nice. But while we were having—oh, did I tell you this story?

ROBERT BROWN: No.

JAMES LECHAY: While we were having lunch—this was in Chicago—while we were having lunch, a man came over to the table and said, "I have just given a Vroman [ph] to the Art Institute of Chicago." And Jack and his—so Jack said, "Why didn't you give me?" And Weber was already beginning to tremble. And the man said, "Mr. Pollock, maybe when I get to like your work, I may do something about it." And Max was getting very upset. He was very tender. You knew Weber, didn't you?

ROBERT BROWN: Weber, yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: You knew him, didn't you?

ROBERT BROWN: I know of him.

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, he was a wonderful guy. So the next morning at the hotel in the morning, I was down waiting for them. And Jack came down and Max wasn't there yet. We were waiting for him. [00:30:00] And he said—Jack said, "I was very rough yesterday and I think that I hurt Max, you know." So I said, "Well, let's take them to breakfast, you know, have lox and bagels on Halsted Street." And—[inaudible]—be a wonderful idea, so we all went and had lox and bagels in Halsted Street. And Max was in good shape. Everything was all right.

So here again you see the tenderness—[inaudible]—in spite of the fact—[inaudible]—very good copy to make him drunk and nasty, which he wasn't at all. He was fine.

ROBERT BROWN: Who was that? Pollock, you mean?

JAMES LECHAY: Sure.

ROBERT BROWN: Max Weber was considerably older than both of you.

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, yeah, a sweet guy.



ROBERT BROWN: This was at a jury at the Art Institute of Chicago?

JAMES LECHAY: At the *Momentum* show in Chicago.

ROBERT BROWN: The *Momentum* show in Chicago.

JAMES LECHAY: In Chicago. I talk about that a while on the tapes too, because we cut the show down to very small, but it was a good show. And, you know, when things are submitted in an open show you're going to get a lot of junk. You know that. So we went through it all. But in that book the authors talk about the fact that Pollock —[inaudible]—impossible, and he's coming to Chicago from New York. And they had to restrain him and all this. He said that in the jury of the show, that I had stepped back and was going to punch him. [00:32:00] All lies, lies, lies.

ROBERT BROWN: Really? And this is in a book this appeared?

JAMES LECHAY: About Pollock, yeah. It's in the library. And I don't even know—they had two authors I don't even know. I got so disgusted. And when I saw Lenny Bocour—who is now dead, but you know who Bocour was.

ROBERT BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

JAMES LECHAY: He also said that he was vilified in that book, a bunch of lies. So I said if the whole book is that way it's a pretty lousy book. But apparently with the name of Pollock it has—

ROBERT BROWN: Sales.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: So Pollock wasn't an arrogant person, to you?

JAMES LECHAY: He was a tough guy, apparently. And yes, he was a tough—I mean—

ROBERT BROWN: Sure.

JAMES LECHAY: But he also—you know, he was killed in an automobile accident, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

[END TAPE 1 SIDE B.]

JAMES LECHAY: —these things, this Cadillac.

ROBERT BROWN: Who said that, Max—

JAMES LECHAY: No, Max said to me.

ROBERT BROWN: Max Weber said—

JAMES LECHAY: "All my life," because he had struggles too, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Sure.

JAMES LECHAY: "In all my life, I wanted one of these." He said, "Now that I can have 20, I don't want any." [They laugh.]

ROBERT BROWN: This is James Lechay. And he was talking about the time he juried an exhibition, a *Momentum* exhibition, in Chicago with Max Weber, about whom he just told this anecdote, and Jackson Pollock. And this was —

JAMES LECHAY: And Ivan Le Lorraine Albright.

ROBERT BROWN: And Ivan Le Lorraine Albright. And this was about the time he went to teach at the University of Iowa about that same time. This is our second interview, and this is August 26, 1998, Bob Brown the interviewer.

Why don't we talk about, to begin with, why you went to Iowa? How did that come about, because you're a New York City guy?

JAMES LECHAY: I was in New York and I had no idea about Iowa at all. I'd never thought about it. But I did take

an award along with Max Weber and Ivan Le Lorraine Albright at the Chicago Art Institute. And there was tremendous publicity about it.

ROBERT BROWN: This was when you got an award in 1941.

JAMES LECHAY: No, this was—this was in, I think it must be, yes, about 1945, I think—'44 or '45, right. And I was invited to come to Iowa to teach. And I was doing very well in New York; that is, I was working very hard in my studio all the time. And I couldn't contemplate at all moving, so I turned it down. [00:02:00] I turned the job down. And the next year again I got the same telegram, would I come to teach? And Rose said, "Look, we"—

ROBERT BROWN: Rose your wife.

JAMES LECHAY: My wife, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: This was a telegram from the University of Iowa.

JAMES LECHAY: Right. Right. She said, "Look, our apartment is very, very small. We're living in a tiny apartment on King Street in New York. She said, "Let's go try it for a year. Let's try it for a while and see what it is." So I said, "Well, okay, let's try." So we tried it and we—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you go out there?

JAMES LECHAY: I wrote and said I would come.

ROBERT BROWN: But you didn't go out and visit?

JAMES LECHAY: I didn't go out to visit at all. We'd never been there. And Phil Guston came down to New York to explain what this whole thing was.

ROBERT BROWN: What do you mean, the whole thing? What do you mean?

JAMES LECHAY: I mean what this apartment was, what I would do teaching, and what the place was like and so on.

ROBERT BROWN: Did Phil Guston—how did he know about it? Was he teaching—

JAMES LECHAY: Because Phil was teaching at St. Louis, Washington University in St. Louis—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: —and he had just come to Iowa. He was in Iowa, and he was there for about a year. And then he left to go and show in New York, and I was invited then to take his place. And so I took his place. And he convinced me that it was a very wonderful place, and so on.

ROBERT BROWN: So he enjoyed—

JAMES LECHAY: He loved it and thought I would love it, and so on, so I took the job. [00:04:00] And I've been there for a long time and it was very, very good.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: That's it.

ROBERT BROWN: When you got to Iowa, what was your first impression?

JAMES LECHAY: It was so quiet and very difficult. It was quiet that the noise—that the quiet was very noisy. [They laugh.] I couldn't quite accept it. It took us a long time to get used to that. And then we loved it. It was fine that—we loved it. It was fine. But it was great.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, now, who were your colleagues when you first got there?

JAMES LECHAY: Mauricio Lasansky, who was in the print department, came one hour after I came.

ROBERT BROWN: One hour?

JAMES LECHAY: One hour. He came from South America. He was in New York for a while, teaching at the—

ROBERT BROWN: At the Art Students League?

JAMES LECHAY: Not the Art Students League. Anyway—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: My memory is not so good.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you know him from New York?

JAMES LECHAY: I knew him not at all.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: We met in Iowa when he came there. And also Eugene Ludins was there.

ROBERT BROWN: Eugene—

JAMES LECHAY: Ludins. He was in—he was in Woodstock and came there. And Albert [ph]—Alberts Yodis [ph], sculptor.

ROBERT BROWN: What was his first name?

JAMES LECHAY: Humberto [ph].

ROBERT BROWN: Humberto Alberts [ph], yeah, sculptor.

JAMES LECHAY: And Iowa was very interesting because it was the first university anywhere—the first university in the United States that hired people who were artists whose whole life had to do with art. And so they never went to grade school, had nothing to do with that. [00:06:00] There was nothing academic about it, but if they were professionals they would take them. And that's the way that University of Iowa art department was arranged.

ROBERT BROWN: And it was the first—

JAMES LECHAY: They were the first university to do that, the first—

ROBERT BROWN: It didn't matter what your education was.

JAMES LECHAY: No. Lasansky had some slight, you know—Albertsio [ph] had nothing, had a grade school education. That's all. And Albertsio [ph]—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. Who lay behind this at the university?

JAMES LECHAY: Lester Longman was the head of the department at that time.

ROBERT BROWN: Lester Longman.

JAMES LECHAY: And he was given credit for that idea.

ROBERT BROWN: And was he an artist himself?

JAMES LECHAY: He was not an artist. He was an art historian. And I don't know how good an art historian, but he was a very good administrator. He was very far-sighted, and his idea was copied by so many people, and for him he got all that credit. So that was fine.

ROBERT BROWN: What do you think the difference was for a university in having a professional artist?

JAMES LECHAY: What it was, these were professional people.

ROBERT BROWN: Because otherwise—

JAMES LECHAY: They had nothing to do with graduate students suddenly taking over and becoming teachers. They had no experience just out of school.

ROBERT BROWN: No.

JAMES LECHAY: These are people who really worked and—worked at their art. They were professionals. They had to fight all the way through.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: And this was very important.

ROBERT BROWN: And what effect—did you see it having an effect on young students right away?

JAMES LECHAY: It was wonderful. It was a wonderful—you know, the reaction was fine. The students just ate it up. They were fine. And the department grew. [00:08:00]

ROBERT BROWN: What was the—what was the background of your early students? Were they mostly from the farms and small towns, or were they—

JAMES LECHAY: No, after all, Iowa there are many people from farms, but they're also from all over the country. No, very sophisticated, all over the country.

ROBERT BROWN: It had a very wide reputation.

JAMES LECHAY: It was fine. They were then developing a fine reputation.

ROBERT BROWN: And was the—

JAMES LECHAY: Grant Wood was there before I came.

ROBERT BROWN: Grant Wood.

JAMES LECHAY: As a matter of fact, when I came—he had died just before I came, a few years before I came, and I had his studio—I worked in his studio there. And the conditions, they were wonderful and everything went very well indeed.

ROBERT BROWN: Was the famous writers' program started by then?

JAMES LECHAY: The Writers' Workshop was there and the poetry workshop was there.

ROBERT BROWN: They were all—

JAMES LECHAY: Paul Engle was the man behind the workshop—a thriving, wonderful place, you know. It's very famous now, you know, but they had writers from all over the—and incidentally, it was very interesting about these writers. Paul would not give tenure to any one of them. They would come back, but none of them had tenure. He didn't believe in that. But they were very, very good, and a very thriving—

ROBERT BROWN: Did he ever explain why they shouldn't have tenure?

JAMES LECHAY: He didn't believe in it.

ROBERT BROWN: He didn't believe in it?

JAMES LECHAY: You know, he kept everything—he kept a tight grip on everything, and he would—

ROBERT BROWN: Paul Engle.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, he was—[inaudible].

ROBERT BROWN: Did you visual artists get tenure? Did you?

JAMES LECHAY: The visual artists did get tenure.

ROBERT BROWN: The visual artists, yes.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, we did.

ROBERT BROWN: And then, in effect, [00:10:00] in the late 1940s—you went there in 1945—

JAMES LECHAY: Went there in 1945.

ROBERT BROWN: —there were a number of New York artists teaching in Iowa.

JAMES LECHAY: Well, Stuart Edie was there. He went there in 1944. He took my place. He took the job that I turned down.

ROBERT BROWN: Which was—

JAMES LECHAY: In 1944.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, he came that year before you decided to come.

JAMES LECHAY: I turned that job down.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: He took it. The next year I went. I wasn't ready yet.

ROBERT BROWN: Did he stay?

JAMES LECHAY: Yes, he was there for quite a long time. Then he died, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you become particularly close to some of your colleagues?

JAMES LECHAY: I think we were close. I mean, we had a wonderful relationship. I think it was a very close relationship. Academically, you know, we knew each other well. We weren't totally intimate but we had a very good relationship, a very good working relationship. We understood each other.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, did you—would you stay there all summer as well, or did you come back to—

JAMES LECHAY: No, in the summertime for a while I would—there were a few summers that I stayed. And then we gave that up and I came to Wellfleet and stayed here all the time. Later on, when I retired permanently, I stayed all summer, but usually I would take the summers off.

ROBERT BROWN: So you had been coming to Cape Cod before—

JAMES LECHAY: Well, my first time in Cape Cod was 1930—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: —when I was in Provincetown at that time.

ROBERT BROWN: Right.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you miss—when you were at Iowa during the teaching or academic year—

JAMES LECHAY: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —did you miss the company of a lot of artists as you had in New York, or [00:12:00] as you had down in Provincetown?

JAMES LECHAY: Certainly enough. Iowa was kind of an enclave. A lot of artists would come there to talk and so on. And also I would go back to New York a good deal.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, you could?

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, sure, you know, we kept going back and forth a good deal. And I had to give up our place, and finally I gave it up in 1975.

ROBERT BROWN: Gave up your place in Iowa?

JAMES LECHAY: In the East Coast, Wellfleet and New York.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh. You had a place in New York, you mean?

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, I see. So you—

JAMES LECHAY: And then we left that and—

ROBERT BROWN: The university would let you travel. How many days did you have to—

JAMES LECHAY: I taught two days a week. That's all.

ROBERT BROWN: Two days a week, so you were free five days a week.

JAMES LECHAY: That's right.

ROBERT BROWN: That was a pretty good deal.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, very good.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it—

JAMES LECHAY: And I did a lot of work.

ROBERT BROWN: Hmm?

JAMES LECHAY: And I did a lot of work.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, you mean a lot of your own painting?

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, certainly.

ROBERT BROWN: Was the salary adequate for that time? It was okay?

JAMES LECHAY: Well, I want to change something. It was an enormous salary in 1945. I got, I think, the highest salary of anybody in the art department. It was \$3,000. And that was raised from—

ROBERT BROWN: Very good salary for that time.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, at that time. Of course now it's nothing.

ROBERT BROWN: Sure.

JAMES LECHAY: But at that time it was very good. We got along very well with it.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: And it wasn't too many years after the WPA—

ROBERT BROWN: That's right.

JAMES LECHAY: —when I got much less than that.

ROBERT BROWN: You bet. So it was a great shot in the arm for you, wasn't it?

JAMES LECHAY: Yes, it was, and very important.

ROBERT BROWN: And it gave you a feeling of security and—

JAMES LECHAY: Well, we had our family raised.

ROBERT BROWN: That's right. You had two children—

JAMES LECHAY: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: —when you went out there, right?

JAMES LECHAY: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: You had a daughter who—

JAMES LECHAY: And a son.

ROBERT BROWN: —was about seven or eight years old and—

JAMES LECHAY: She was about nine years old, right. [00:14:00] My son was just born.

ROBERT BROWN: Just born, an infant.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes. Tell me, when you were there did you work still regularly? You said you had a lot of time to paint. Did you regularly just continue to send things to exhibitions and—

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, sure, I did a lot of work.

ROBERT BROWN: There was really no break.

JAMES LECHAY: The only difference was at that time I had a salary. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, but it didn't—teaching in a university didn't cripple you in any way.

JAMES LECHAY: Not at all. Not at all.

ROBERT BROWN: A lot of people—

JAMES LECHAY: Not at all. I taught two days a week and that was it. And they were very good. Some of the students were excellent. I had excellent students. And some of them went on to make good names for themselves, like Miriam Shapiro—"Mimi" Shapiro, Jane Wilson, Paul Brach. These are good people.

ROBERT BROWN: Those were all students of yours?

JAMES LECHAY: And Paul Parker—Ray Parker.

ROBERT BROWN: Ray Parker.

JAMES LECHAY: Yes, they were my students. They were good, and dedicated, devoted, and bright, and talented.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, did these students—were they recruited, these better students, or did they just—was the word of—the reputation of the university—

JAMES LECHAY: No, they—

ROBERT BROWN: —of the program—

JAMES LECHAY: They came to Iowa however one comes to a school. People weren't sent out to get them—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: —but they came of their own initiative.

ROBERT BROWN: Say in the 1940s and '50s, how would you compare the program at Iowa with others? Was it one of the better ones or was it—

JAMES LECHAY: I think the program in Iowa in the 1940s was superb because it was geared to producing work of an artist. You were in an artist studio. [00:16:00] That was it. And that was fine. That was dedication. That was fine. And that was important.

Later on I think this—I understand I haven't been there for some time, but I would have said that it's a little bit deteriorated because it hasn't got the fire that it did have at that time, and he hasn't got the fire that I had at that time.

ROBERT BROWN: No, of course not.

JAMES LECHAY: But it was good. But it was a good class.

ROBERT BROWN: But I suppose that's inevitable that a program loses some of its—

JAMES LECHAY: That's right.

ROBERT BROWN: —first passion.

JAMES LECHAY: That's right.

ROBERT BROWN: You taught occasionally at other places, I guess.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, I taught at Leland Stanford in California.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: I taught at NYU.

ROBERT BROWN: Many places, yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, NYU in New York.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, who were some of your closest friends in—say, in the '40s and '50s? Did you create additional friends?

JAMES LECHAY: I had many friends. I had many friends. I was always in the art circles. I had many friends there, for sure. I was not unknown.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

JAMES LECHAY: And they were not unknown to me. We were friends. The communication was always fine and very good.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you develop a regular New York dealer? Did you have one around that time or—

JAMES LECHAY: I never had any problems with dealers. My first show was with the Artists Gallery in New York. And this was about 1935 or '36, I think. And my friend, Hirsh Margules, who ran that gallery—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, De Hirsh Margules.

JAMES LECHAY: Margules, he started that gallery. Then I was invited to Feragil. You know the Feragil Gallery? I was there for quite some time.

ROBERT BROWN: It's a reputed gallery.

JAMES LECHAY: And I was there—I was at the Macbeth Gallery. [00:18:00] And when Macbeth folded, I was invited to come to Kraushaar. That's right, Kraushaar invited me. And this goes way back. This was 1950.

ROBERT BROWN: Nineteen fifty.

JAMES LECHAY: And I've been with Macbeth Gallery since then.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean with Kraushaar?

JAMES LECHAY: In the meantime, I tried other places. You do workshops and so on all over the place.

ROBERT BROWN: Sure.

JAMES LECHAY: But basically my dealer has always been Kraushaar or Feragil or Macbeth, it seems. I've never had—I have never had any problem getting a gallery. It's never been a problem of mine. And I must say that is a problem for so many people.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, yes. Do you suppose you were at the right place at the right time?

JAMES LECHAY: That is possible.

ROBERT BROWN: Or do you suppose it was the kind of work you were doing?

JAMES LECHAY: I don't know. I don't know, but the fact is that I didn't have any trouble getting galleries. I had trouble making a living. That's why I had to teach.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: You know? If I had to do it without teaching, I would have had one difficult time.

ROBERT BROWN: Sure.

JAMES LECHAY: It would be impossible.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, in your exhibition life, did you have sales to any considerable extent always, or did that go up and down?

JAMES LECHAY: Not enough to keep me going.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.



JAMES LECHAY: Not enough to keep me going after all, no. I had a family.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: And I had to—I had to supplement all this with my teaching.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: It would have been very different without it.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. And I suppose in the 1930s and '40s that sales were pretty slow, weren't they, or is that wrong?

JAMES LECHAY: Well, as far as I recognize, they were always slow for me, you know. [00:20:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: They're always slow for me but it kept me going, you know?

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: Very modestly. And there was no luxurious living at all. But I had to paint. That was my life. And I didn't do it to make money, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: There was a real compulsion.

JAMES LECHAY: I had to do it.

ROBERT BROWN: You said at one point that all of your work is self-portraits.

JAMES LECHAY: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: Can you explain that a bit?

JAMES LECHAY: Yes, I'll explain it. I think that everything I do—or anything anybody does, he's talking about himself. He's talking about—I'm always talking about myself. No matter what I'm talking about, no matter what I'm painting—whether it's a still life or a landscape or whatever it is, whatever the subject—the subject primarily is me. And when I paint, I'm always talking about myself.

So everything I do, no matter if you see the face or a cat or a—God Almighty, whatever it is, it's always me. Incidentally it's a still life, it's a landscape, it's—but through the still life, through the landscape, through the figure, through anything I do, it's always—I'm always talking about myself. And in that sense, what I say is everything I do is a self-portrait.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, in saying that you're simply being honest, aren't you?

JAMES LECHAY: I'm being very honest.

ROBERT BROWN: You're not trying to be immodest.

JAMES LECHAY: I don't—

ROBERT BROWN: You're simply stating a fact.

JAMES LECHAY: I'm just stating the fact that when I paint I'm always talking about me. [00:22:00] And if you like what I'm doing, it's fine. If you don't, I can't help it. It's okay. You know, but you're—you know, I'm my own judge, my own jury, and I'm going to stay with that. And I have to take the lumps or take the credit.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: That's all right. But it's always me.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: I don't, you know, hang on to any particular fashionable style, or this or that. I'm not interested in that at all. As a matter of fact, that repels me.

ROBERT BROWN: That repels you.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, that repels me. But you cannot help being affected by your environment, what is around you, by the world around you. Something always creeps in. And this is development. You use it aesthetically or you don't. I don't use it commercially. I don't know how. Doing so—I'm repelled by that kind of thing. I don't like it.

And I don't think of making a living by my work. I can't, I don't, and I do not make any compromises whatsoever. I don't try to please anybody or change it, whatever. It's my work. You like it or you don't. It's okay with me. But it's mine. Is that clear?

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you think you stand apart from most of your contemporaries—

JAMES LECHAY: No, I don't.

ROBERT BROWN: —in that attitude, or do you think many people share—

JAMES LECHAY: No, I don't. I think every serious artist has that—[inaudible]. I don't stand apart at all. I think we're all together there. We believe in that. [00:24:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: That's why we work, you know? If you want to do commercial work, that's something else. I'm not interested in that. But if you're an artist—[inaudible]—you're thinking about yourself. You're thinking about your life in your own studio. This is you. And it's a lonely life.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, you're by yourself. The only one who can help you is you. Nobody else can help you. You are the one. You've got talent, you have taste, and you have work, that will be it.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. When American art became acclaimed after World War II and acquired an international reputation and prices skyrocketed, did that—how did that affect you? I mean, was there a temptation—did you see a lot of people falling—succumbing to the temptation to cash in?

JAMES LECHAY: No, becoming Abstract Expressionists, for instance? No. I tried it to see if I could do it, but I didn't feel that way. It's not for me. I know it's not for me. I didn't want it, not for me. But I wanted to investigate it and see what it was, but I didn't—not for me. It's not my protoplasm. It's not my chemistry.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: I've got to do what I have to do. It's not my food, right?

ROBERT BROWN: Yep. You say you—I don't know for how—you rework your earlier work sometimes. Do you physically rework it or do you look at it and—

JAMES LECHAY: I [00:26:00] feel that no painting I do is ever finished. It's a continuous thing. And it's finished at all times. At the same time, it's never finished.

And so I get something back from a museum, something I had in their art show, and I either change it or accept it or figure out how to work on it, and I would do it. Sometimes I would destroy it if it was not what I want. And I made many bad mistakes. I'm sure of that now as I look at some of the photographs. And I don't have these things anymore. Why did I destroy it? It's out of sheer nervousity that I destroyed these things, or changed them, or had to do it. And that's the way I work.

So I'd work on a thing—and that's why I never date things, or hardly ever, because I'd have to keep on putting many dates on the same painting because I'd pick it up and stop, and then I'd pick it up again and then stop. Am I going to keep dating it every time I stop work on it and start again? I'd have a whole series of dates that were—

ROBERT BROWN: Is this because each time you look at one of your works—

JAMES LECHAY: I feel it's finished.

ROBERT BROWN: It's finished?

JAMES LECHAY: But, I mean, later on I feel it's not finished so I've got to work some more.

ROBERT BROWN: You have to work some more on it.

JAMES LECHAY: But it's finished enough to show.

ROBERT BROWN: Okay.

JAMES LECHAY: I believe in it until I feel I made a mistake.

ROBERT BROWN: If it's something you can believe in and stand behind, you'll show it, even though—

JAMES LECHAY: I'll show it, yeah, but that doesn't mean I'll never do work on it again. I may work on it again.

ROBERT BROWN: So you work on it—

JAMES LECHAY: I've done that. I have done that many times and I'll keep on doing it.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: There's always something I—whatever it is, the vibration is that hits me, [00:28:00] I've got to change that, I've got to—it might be a moon, it might be something in—who knows what, but that's it, I've got to change it, got to change it. It needs a little more seasoning or whatever. Who knows?

ROBERT BROWN: Do you work pretty fast?

JAMES LECHAY: On the contrary; I work very slowly, but no matter how long I work on something, no matter how long, finally it's got to appear as I just did it without any effort. It's got to appear actually effortless. You'll never see the work, the time that it's taken, the reworking, the struggle, the fighting. It's there, but when I present it, it's got to look as though it has been just breathed on the canvas. You know, if you saw an actor struggling with his part on a stage, you'd get very embarrassed.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: I don't want that. My work has to look simple and fresh and easy. Does it make sense to you?

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. One gets the feeling in much of your work of economy—

JAMES LECHAY: Absolutely.

ROBERT BROWN: —of simplicity—

JAMES LECHAY: Absolutely.

ROBERT BROWN: —or a reduction from—

JAMES LECHAY: Absolutely right—

ROBERT BROWN: Are those things—are they fair to say?

JAMES LECHAY: —because even the simplest things I do start from great complexity [00:30:00] and it's always reduced, eliminated, thrown out. Just essential things are kept that have the essence, have the meaning of it, so that a few lines could represent many, many lines and be right, not like a lot of lines—[inaudible]—still have in a sketch. I want to reduce, have economy there. I want it simplified. I want it to be right. And it's got to live. That's my only criteria in a painting: Does it have life? That's all. If it has life, I'll accept it.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you start with a sketch, or not really? If you sketch—

JAMES LECHAY: I don't know how—

ROBERT BROWN: You go right to the canvas?

JAMES LECHAY: I have no idea—I start right on the canvas, and that can change a million times before things are resolved.

ROBERT BROWN: So there's not really a conventional sketching process.

JAMES LECHAY: No, no, no, no, I don't have that. I can't do that. If I have one thing down in a sketch I've already done it and I can't do it anymore. Do you see what I mean?

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: Once it's stated, it's stated. I can't repeat it. If I repeat something it gets stale and it gets static. It gets dead. I can't do it. It's not my protoplasm. I'm not saying that other people can't do it. They have to do

what they have to do. But I have to do what I have to do. Simple.

ROBERT BROWN: Have you noted that in yourself from the very beginning when you started, when you were—

JAMES LECHAY: That's a hard question. I don't know what I noted at the very beginning. I know at the very beginning all I wanted to do was to paint. [00:32:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. But you don't ever recall going out with a sketchbook and spending time doing that?

JAMES LECHAY: Yes, I've done sketches.

ROBERT BROWN: You did some.

JAMES LECHAY: I've done that, taking notes and so on.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: But that's not my way.

ROBERT BROWN: No, but you might—

JAMES LECHAY: Once I did the sketch and did it, I can't do it again.

ROBERT BROWN: Sure.

JAMES LECHAY: I can't use it. I could get some idea to remind me of something and do it—then I could do it, but once I've got it down on paper it's done. I can't repeat it. You know?

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES LECHAY: It's done. It's finished. But on the canvas I work on it over and over and things—new things appear and new things are thrown out. So it's a continuous thing. It never stops. And that's why it's finished at all stages and it's never finished. Does that make sense to you?

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So I can understand—I don't mean to belabor it, but the idea of a sketch as something preliminary doesn't exist for you, because things are finished.

JAMES LECHAY: It doesn't mean much—[phone rings]. Excuse me.

[Audio break.]

ROBERT BROWN: So painting, when you're convinced that something is finished, it could be at any point. I mean, sometimes it's work you've labored on for a long time and sometimes not, right? Is that fair to say?

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. So we're not talking so much about process. We're talking about—

JAMES LECHAY: About what?

ROBERT BROWN: Process. We're not—

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: We are talking about not so much how things are made, because there's no one way, is that correct?

JAMES LECHAY: Correct.

ROBERT BROWN: You never—

JAMES LECHAY: I have no formula.

ROBERT BROWN: No formula.

JAMES LECHAY: No, of course not.

ROBERT BROWN: No. [00:34:00] Has your work always tended—you've always, for a very long time, tended to try to reduce things to their essence. That's fair to say, isn't it?

JAMES LECHAY: It seems to me—you know, it seems to me that in all the reviews I've had, going way back, the essential thing that they all talk about is simplicity.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: And I look at it and say, I don't see that it's so simple. I know the struggle that I went through, you know. But anybody that says it's so simple, open—I mean, they all say that. That's the immediate reaction. But I guess it's true that all the way through I've insisted on that or felt it without even consciously, you know, doing it. I just did it.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, like automatic writing—writing something that you don't even remember and there it is.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: You know?

ROBERT BROWN: But you seem to think—I think you feel that you went through a great deal of struggle—you went through a great deal of struggle and it was a complex—

JAMES LECHAY: Tremendous struggle. It wasn't easy at all.

ROBERT BROWN: It wasn't a simple—

JAMES LECHAY: It looks easy, but it wasn't easy at all. It was a tremendous struggle and hard work, and very depressing too. I want to tell you something.

ROBERT BROWN: Is that right?

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, because suddenly you feel that I have no talent, that you're inadequate. I'd say, what the hell is the matter with you? They're just work where nothing happens, you know. So of course, it's a difficult life, but I don't want any other. [00:36:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: After all, if you're in the studio alone all day long, facing a canvas, and there's nobody there to hold your hand, definitely alone—you know, you're alone with lots of worries and joys and depressions and fights and anger, and everything that runs through you in producing a painting. And finally if something happens and you got what you wanted, it destroys all those periods of feeling depressed and useless.

ROBERT BROWN: And what is there a feeling of then?

JAMES LECHAY: Then it's elation.

ROBERT BROWN: Elation, yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: Certainly. You feel accomplishment and it's worth it. It cuts all this other stuff out, you know. It cuts all that depressing stuff out.

ROBERT BROWN: This must have been—how could you convey this to your students, that this must have been a wonderful thing for them to behold? Of course, they weren't immediate witnesses of it. I assume you were painting on your own and they were doing their work—

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: —on their own. But could they witness this in—

JAMES LECHAY: I don't know how they feel, but I know I had many devoted students. They thought I was pretty good. And if I wasn't able to help them, I'd tell them—[inaudible]—and invite them to work with somebody else who I felt could help them. [00:38:00] You know, I don't believe in the business of grades in the first place.

ROBERT BROWN: No?

JAMES LECHAY: But that was just one of the facts of life in a university. I've always objected to that kind of thing.

ROBERT BROWN: Grades and all that stuff. Tell me how you would approach your teaching. I mean, let's say there was a student you felt you could help. How did you proceed? By neglect or by occasional suggestions or—

JAMES LECHAY: I think basically what I wanted to do is to try to have the students explain themselves, talk about themselves, you know, and put down what they feel, right? Also, we're in the discipline of learning how to see. You've got to see also. I want them to look carefully. So we'd have still life. We'd have figures and everything. But I'd have them observe and watch, to look carefully what they're doing, to open their eyes, to develop a vision, to develop good, clear sight, and also not to lose sight of themselves, to really express what they feel. In all picture-making, not to make it dull pictures. Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: That was secondary.

JAMES LECHAY: But that doesn't mean that everything is acceptable. No, you had to be disciplined.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: [00:40:00] They had to be honest, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: So they must have a discipline to develop this power within them.

JAMES LECHAY: Absolutely. If they didn't have the discipline I'd say, you know, "We can't work together."

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: And I'd suggest somebody else.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: That's what it is. I mean, they had to believe in themselves. They have to have—to fight it, to work with it, you know, to live it, but also to work out their own problems. And all I could do is guide their hand in such a way that they don't get corny in concept, that the concept is clear, aesthetically clear and not corn.

ROBERT BROWN: Not corn.

JAMES LECHAY: Corn, like corn—

ROBERT BROWN: I guess some were apt to become, what, sentimental or—

JAMES LECHAY: Yes, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —cliché?

JAMES LECHAY: Yes. To me that has nothing to do with art. That's something else again.

ROBERT BROWN: So you felt you made the right decision in staying in Iowa?

JAMES LECHAY: Did I make the right decision?

ROBERT BROWN: To stay at Iowa.

JAMES LECHAY: Did I make the right—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you make the right decision—

JAMES LECHAY: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —in deciding to stay on for many years?

JAMES LECHAY: Yes, absolutely correct. Absolutely correct, yeah. I was certainly given lots of freedom. I did lots of work.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: Yes, and I went to many places. Immediately after I retired from Iowa, I went to Hong Kong and I taught at Chinese universities. It was fun. I taught in Greece, you know. So it was nice.

ROBERT BROWN: In the '70s and '80s. You retired in 1975.

JAMES LECHAY: Seventy-five. [00:42:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Can we talk a bit about your continuing relations in New York? That is, after you went to Iowa?

JAMES LECHAY: Well, I've never really—

ROBERT BROWN: You kept friends going?

JAMES LECHAY: I'd never given—it was my home in New York.

ROBERT BROWN: That was your home? Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: And my studio was there. My work was there. My friends were there. The galleries and the museums—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, you've told about various people who were—you were close to. You were a good friend, I guess, in your earlier days of the Soyer brothers.

JAMES LECHAY: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: Did that friendship continue?

JAMES LECHAY: Who?

ROBERT BROWN: With the Soyers, Raphael and Moses.

JAMES LECHAY: Soyer. I've known them for a long time.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. And that friendship continued?

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, yeah. Well, they're both dead, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, I know.

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And you were also, at some point, a good friend of Abraham Walkowitz.

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, yes, indeed. I loved him. I did a couple of portraits of Abe. And he had a show—he's an interesting man. He had a show and he sat for a hundred different artists.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, yes.

JAMES LECHAY: And he had a show of these portraits. I think it opened at the Brooklyn Museum. I forget now. I have the catalogue, by the way, of that too.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, I've seen that.

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, you saw it?

ROBERT BROWN: I've seen that, yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: He's a wonderful person.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: He was a great—he was rather gregarious, wasn't he? He was involved in many things?

JAMES LECHAY: As a matter of fact, way, way back he was in the *Armory Show*, way back in the *Armory Show*. He was wonderful, and he—

ROBERT BROWN: So he was somewhat older than you were.

JAMES LECHAY: Yes, indeed he was.

ROBERT BROWN: Okay.

JAMES LECHAY: He was madly in love with Isadora Duncan. You know who Isadora was?

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: And he never spoke to her. [00:44:00] And he did hundreds of Isadora Duncan little paintings. I have one. Did you see that? Yeah. He was charming, lovely.

ROBERT BROWN: You also knew, to some degree, I guess, Alfred Stieglitz, didn't you?

JAMES LECHAY: I knew him very slightly. I was up at his gallery many times. I knew his—you know, his stable, so to speak. And I liked him very much. We weren't close but except that I knew him from the gallery.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you know some of his artists?

JAMES LECHAY: I knew Marsden Hartley.

ROBERT BROWN: Ah.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you get to know him?

JAMES LECHAY: At the gallery. He was one of—he was one of Stieglitz's people.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you spend a bit of time with—

JAMES LECHAY: No, just in the gallery, that's all.

ROBERT BROWN: Was he interested in younger artists?

JAMES LECHAY: He was interested in me as a boy.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, I see.

JAMES LECHAY: But he was a wonderful painter.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah? Right.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Was he very talkative?

JAMES LECHAY: I don't remember that particularly.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: But, you know, he had his sexual problems, but that's all right. It's okay with me. That's his life. But he's a wonderful painter. That's important to me.

ROBERT BROWN: And you've already, I think, mentioned a bit Arshile Gorky—

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, yes, indeed.

ROBERT BROWN: —the end of his life.

JAMES LECHAY: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: He was a rather arrogant man in some ways.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, I think I told you a story about him. As a matter of fact, Hayden Herrera—do you know, Hayden Herrera?

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, who had—yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: She, in a very strange way, [00:46:00] is related to Gorky, you know that, and is very distantly—she never knew him. I had a lot of interviews with Hayden, and she's writing a book on Gorky and she told me a week ago—and she's on a second draft.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: And we thought of his arrogance. When it came to his own work, it was very strange. I met him in the park—or did I tell you this story? I don't know.



ROBERT BROWN: Go ahead.

JAMES LECHAY: I met him in Washington Square Park. He said, "Come on, sit down. I want to talk to you." And so we sat down and we talked. And he was carrying a book on his arm. And he took out—he took it out and he showed it to me. He said, "I wish that when I am 80"—

[END TAPE 2 SIDE A.]

ROBERT BROWN: He said, I wish I could draw—

JAMES LECHAY: And he was so humble—

ROBERT BROWN: Humble.

JAMES LECHAY: —when he—in spite of all his—

ROBERT BROWN: When he gave you his own—

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah. That's something else. I see it—[inaudible].

ROBERT BROWN: But he could be—

JAMES LECHAY: It's a nice contradiction. It was wonderful.

ROBERT BROWN: Was he rather intimidating to a young—

JAMES LECHAY: No.

ROBERT BROWN: Not really?

JAMES LECHAY: No, come on. Not at all.

ROBERT BROWN: He wasn't.

JAMES LECHAY: No, but he might have intimidated some people but I never felt that way.

ROBERT BROWN: No.

JAMES LECHAY: I just felt that this man is very arrogant. And I know that I was at his studio one time and I was dying to have the paints, and so—

ROBERT BROWN: You were dying what?

JAMES LECHAY: To have paint. I was broke.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: And he took a cobalt blue, right on the canvas, destroyed it, squeezed the whole thing out. He looked at it then he wiped it off with his hand. I felt like—[laughs]. Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: A very wasteful use of—

JAMES LECHAY: Whether it was part of the arrogance and showing off and so on—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. What did you think—

JAMES LECHAY: I always felt also about Gorky that he died too quickly, you know. You know, he did himself in. You know that?

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: Well, he was sick, because I felt that he—even though it's very much like inferences to Picasso and so on and so on, he was very good but hadn't quite yet flowered to himself, come to that point where—I felt all the time that he—[inaudible]—too much the other people rather than Gorky. And I think also that his death was tragic. [00:02:00] And just before that he had a big fire in his studio. And nothing went well there. So there was a wonderful newspaper story. You have it right there, don't you?

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES LECHAY: Human story. And I think that that partly was—resulted in publicity. I think anyway. I may be wrong, but I think so.

ROBERT BROWN: Publicity but it was a bit late for him, but publicity.

JAMES LECHAY: Well, sure, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: But it is dramatic, you know, after all.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, yes. Well, in the '50s and the like, did you—when you were in New York, were you involved with various artists' groups or anything like that, or—

JAMES LECHAY: No.

ROBERT BROWN: Not really.

JAMES LECHAY: No, I had artist friends.

ROBERT BROWN: You had artist friends.

JAMES LECHAY: I didn't join any groups or anything like that.

ROBERT BROWN: What about—

JAMES LECHAY: I was always kind of working alone.

ROBERT BROWN: Working alone. And did the same apply to Provincetown? Or I guess you were probably—

JAMES LECHAY: Certainly.

ROBERT BROWN: You were probably a member of the artists' association and things like that.

JAMES LECHAY: Yes, well, who's not?

ROBERT BROWN: But that made no demands.

JAMES LECHAY: No.

ROBERT BROWN: But you stayed unto yourself mostly.

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, sure.

ROBERT BROWN: Did your wife share most of your interests, or all of them?

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, sure.

ROBERT BROWN: Did she paint?

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, certainly. I mean, she was a librarian.

ROBERT BROWN: She was a librarian.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: But what do you—why did you keep coming, say, back to Cape Cod? Was there something—just nostalgia or habit, sheer habit?

JAMES LECHAY: Well, the first time I was in Provincetown—I came back to Provincetown three, four years in a row then went to Gloucester and Rockport, [00:04:00] and came back here. And then when I retired, we decided to buy something here. I didn't know whether to buy it in Long Island or the Hampton Bays. We decided we'd stay here—we'd buy it here, and that's what we did.

ROBERT BROWN: So you bought this place in the 19—

JAMES LECHAY: Fifty-six.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, even earlier before you retired, yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And did you design the place?

JAMES LECHAY: No. Hayden Walling—

ROBERT BROWN: Hayden?

JAMES LECHAY: Hayden Walling.

ROBERT BROWN: Walling.

JAMES LECHAY: W-A-L-L-I-N-G, who also committed suicide.

ROBERT BROWN: He was your architect?

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah. But he took all his ideas from Breuer and Chermayeff and so on.

ROBERT BROWN: Who are both down here as well as well, in Wellfleet—

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: — Breuer and Chermayeff.

JAMES LECHAY: And he built this place. He built it as a shack, actually, in his first years, nothing but—nothing.

ROBERT BROWN: Just a shell.

JAMES LECHAY: Just a—and later on we insulated it, put in the walls, put in new windows—double windows—and made it comfortable.

ROBERT BROWN: So initially it was just a summer residence.

JAMES LECHAY: Yes, yeah. Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: So when you're down here—this is—you're to yourself. It's quiet. Both the building—the house and the studio are north-facing with ample light. It was ideal for you to work and be unto yourself, wasn't it?

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. And that's the way you've described you work anyway, is on your own. And did you wife, Rose, did she leave you—you were left to be unto yourself?

JAMES LECHAY: She always had things to do.

ROBERT BROWN: She had lots to do.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: [00:06:00] Did you get involved at all, or—fairly regularly, say, with the art groups around this area?

JAMES LECHAY: No. I should.

ROBERT BROWN: Sure.

JAMES LECHAY: You know, I should, but I wasn't a member of any group.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, I know historically in Provincetown there were tensions, oh, I suppose through World War II between those who were modernists and those who were conservatives.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, but I—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you ever—did you steer clear of all that?

JAMES LECHAY: I never pay any attention to that kind of stuff. If they fight, let them have it. All I wanted to do is to paint.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, you were just going to paint.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah. I think if they painted more and argued less it would be much better. [They laugh.]

ROBERT BROWN: What are your plans? I mean, you're still painting pretty steadily, aren't you? What are you—are you out there about every day?

JAMES LECHAY: I've got a show that just closed last—what is this, Thursday, Tuesday, Wednesday?

ROBERT BROWN: Wednesday the 26th.

JAMES LECHAY: Well, my show closed on Monday.

ROBERT BROWN: Where's that?

JAMES LECHAY: Berta Walker.

ROBERT BROWN: In Berta Walker?

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: The most active commercial gallery in Provincetown, right.

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, that's a good gallery.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, yes, yes. And you had a big show at Kraushaar last fall.

JAMES LECHAY: No, I didn't have a big show. I'm always with Kraushaar. I always show there. I had a big show a few years ago, a big show.

ROBERT BROWN: But you did have a show in October.

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, yeah. Yes, I always show there, but I'm talking about a one-man showing.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, you were—

JAMES LECHAY: I had a big, big show there a few years ago.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. Do you feel the same—as far as you can judge, the same kind of rhythm of exploring yourself through your work as you've had for many years? Do you sense any difference now? Do you feel you're a bit slower and you have—

JAMES LECHAY: [00:08:00] Physically I'm certainly slower. Absolutely. I don't have the energy I had. I'm 91 years old.

ROBERT BROWN: Ninety-one, right.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah. But I'm working all the time.

ROBERT BROWN: When you get into the procedure you're as you've always been as far as you can tell?

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah, but you get older, you get older, you know. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, sure. Do you think in terms of a legacy, of leaving a body of work?

JAMES LECHAY: I've given it to the University of Iowa Museum.

ROBERT BROWN: You what?

JAMES LECHAY: I've left it to the University of Iowa.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, I see.

JAMES LECHAY: That's already done.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: Oh, yeah, because they've been very good to me.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES LECHAY: They own a lot of my work. And this is already arranged, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you also think in terms of a legacy to your two children, your son and your daughter?

JAMES LECHAY: They can take whatever they want.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. Well, I don't mean physically. I mean almost spiritually is there a legacy?

JAMES LECHAY: I think—yeah, I think they're pretty good people.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you see in them—I mean, your daughter is in the theater, dancing.

JAMES LECHAY: She's a dancer and he is a poet, a very good poet.

ROBERT BROWN: And he's a poet.

JAMES LECHAY: That's pretty good.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. And your daughter's name is—

JAMES LECHAY: Jo—Jo—Jo—Jo Lechay Lion.

ROBERT BROWN: And her last name?

JAMES LECHAY: Lion.

ROBERT BROWN: L-I-O-

JAMES LECHAY: L-I-O-N.

ROBERT BROWN: Lion.

JAMES LECHAY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Who lives in Montreal, right? And your son, Dan—Daniel—

JAMES LECHAY: Dan Lechay, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: —is in Iowa.

JAMES LECHAY: Daniel. He's a very good poet and very well-received and has some very fine honors, publications and so on, very bright. And she's a very good dancer, but she's getting on a little bit, you know, so she can't do the same things she did so her performances are—

ROBERT BROWN: [00:10:00] Was she more a choreographer?

JAMES LECHAY: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You once told me—you said there are a hell of a lot of painters but there are really very few artists.

JAMES LECHAY: I believe that. Don't you? I certainly believe that more and more, I think especially with everybody in the world who paints now.

ROBERT BROWN: That's certainly one change you've seen, the growth in numbers.

JAMES LECHAY: Yes, I feel there's very little critical sense. You know, anything goes, except anything does not go.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

[END TAPE 2 SIDE B.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]