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**Oral history interview with Robert Cottingham,  
1998 July 27**

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Robert Cottingham on July 27, 1998. The interview took place in Newtown, CT, 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 tape one of two, side A.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [00:00:00] This is an interview with Robert Cottingham in his studio in Newtown, Connecticut, on July 27, 1998, Robert Brown, the interviewer. Bob, I thought we might just take this rather biographically and perhaps we could talk about your background, your upbringing. Uh, you were born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1935.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: That's right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was your family in the arts? Or was there some connection with what you later have done?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: No, there was no connection at all. I think everyone was mystified by my drawing talent and where it might have come from. Uh, I did have one aunt, my father's sister, that could draw, and I remember seeing a couple of her drawings, but I don't think she spent much time at it either. So, there really was, uh—it really came from out of nowhere as far as anybody could figure.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Huh. And it came pretty early, did it?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: It came very early, I realized that I've always wanted to be an artist of one form or another. And there were a lot of changes in my choice as I grew up. It started off where I thought I'd be an architect, because I'd just been playing with blocks, and my mother would suggest that that might be something I'd be interested in.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Um, later it was a cartoonist. I did a lot of Sunday cartoons, I mean strips myself, obviously.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, then I wanted to be an industrial designer. Um, and I took that in high school. Brooklyn Tech—which was a technical high school.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well what, what kind—was your family sort of a middle-class family? In, uh—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —pretty much so, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —who had been in Brooklyn for a while?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yes. They were. My—actually, my father was, yes. Uh, his ancestors went back quite a ways in Brooklyn.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, someone told me that there was a—there was a tugboat company that was part of the family at one time. I never did zero-in on that, or, or even know the name of it. But they lo—that was lost, uh, last century sometime. And uh—I don't—other than that, I don't—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What part of Brooklyn did you grow up in?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: [00:02:00] I grew up in—I knew you were going to ask me that, so I made this little map, because I—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh okay, so we can kind of get a good idea.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —I'm completely confused about this. My, my father always said that we lived in South Brooklyn. This is when I grew up, that's what you called our neighborhood, South Brooklyn.

ROBERT F. BROWN: South Brooklyn.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: This is—this is a map of Brooklyn, here's Manhattan, and this is north, all right?

ROBERT F. BROWN: All right.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Well, this is where we lived.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sort of a west-central—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Would you call that south? Yeah. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: No, sort of west-central, it looks like.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yeah. So, I can't really figure out—and I never heard anyone else—I've asked people, and anyone I meet that has any connection with Brooklyn at all, I'll ask them this question. And I haven't gotten a straight answer yet.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So were you—how—where were you? Were you fairly near Prospect Park?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Right. We were near Prospect Park—

ROBERT F. BROWN: The great park.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —and even nearer to Greenwood Cemetery.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: It was kind of an extension of, um, Park Slope, if you were to continue climbing the numbers, for instance, from 8th Street, or 10th Street, and, and go higher. When you

got to 22nd Street—that's what street that we were—

ROBERT F. BROWN: That's where you were.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —we were on, and, and between 6th and 7th Avenues.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Okay.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, so you have to come up with a name—

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —of the neighborhood. I notice now that real estate agents are calling it Sunset Park, which it never was. Sunset Park didn't start until the low 40s. Now, suddenly, that's been stretched down to encompass where we were living back then. Does—that doesn't make any sense to me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Or is that perhaps just some devious—or some selling point on their—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: [Laughs.] Obviously, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —of their—yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yes, yes. Yes. It's like when we left London—we used to live in Fulham—we can talk about that later, but I—when we left, the estate agents, as the real estate agents are called there, were referring to it as West Chelsea, so these things happen. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: It was quite a different thing, yes. Hold a second.

[Audio break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, was your father a professional of some sort? Or what—?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: He was a dock worker, for many years. He was a longshoreman, and he worked on Pier 33 in Brooklyn, which was the Booth Line. And he was a checker. What he did was—I guess he had a clipboard in his hand most of the time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: [00:04:00] He would watch what came off and what went on to the ships.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was the Booth Line a freight line? Or a—?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yes. It was. Before that he'd had some office jobs. He would work in the bank at one point, and I remember when I was very young he worked at a company called—I think it must've been Recording and Statistical, which was a mouthful for a little kid to say—

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —and that's why I remember it so well. [They laugh.] I don't know what that company was.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You remember going down—did you spend any time at all on the waterfront

in Brooklyn at that—?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: I did. I would visit him. He'd take me down there and show me to his co-workers when I was little and have a lunch with him once in a while there. Now, that was thrilling, to see a whole different world with this activity going on. There were tracks, obviously, there were trains that would come in there. Boxcars were being loaded and all of that. So that probably impressed me and had some, some place in my later work.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, that's interesting, certainly in light of some aspects of your work. Whereas where you lived was—what would you think of it? Almost suburban? Or not? Were they row houses, or—?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Oh, they were row houses.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Very, very much so. Um, they told me that we lived—the first year that I was born, we lived on 19th Street, down around 4th Avenue. I don't know what the address was or what house that was. And then at the end of my first year we moved to this other address, where we stayed for about 17 years. Sixteen or 17 years. And that was 337A—letter A—on 22nd Street. So we left there when I was a senior in high school, and then moved down to Fort Hamilton.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Which is—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Also in Brooklyn.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah.

[Cross talk.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: So that'd be in the early '50s or so.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: [Inaudible.] That was '50—uh, '53.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Was the uh—with Brooklyn, would you say, at that time, did it seem—was it undergoing a lot of change? Could you tell? As a young man, probably not. I mean, it's just—you accepted what it was.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: No, the big change I remember was that cobblestone streets were being paved and smoothed out.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, wow.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: I do recall that. And then our street remained cobblestone for quite a while. [00:06:00] I remember trucks would come down with—it sounds so old-fashioned to be saying this kind of thing, because—

ROBERT F. BROWN: No.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —I remember my father talking about things like this, but there were coal trucks that had these hard rubber wheels, and they would come down those—on that cobblestone, and everything would vibrate. I remember things falling off—[laughs]—the shelf. [They laugh.] So that was a big improvement. That was progress, to have a smooth street, and one that we could

then play stickball on, whatever.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, you, you would say you were pretty well adjusted in the neighborhood? I mean, you had played the usual sports, and all that.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: We played, yeah, we played—skated, and played basketball, and baseball, and softball.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you have brothers and sisters, or—?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, no, I had two—uh, I had twin brothers that followed me, but they were prematurely born. They both died.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Um, and I had a sister, uh, later. She was five years younger than I was, and she died at 40. She had cancer, so I'm the sole son, surviving.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you aware, even as a young fellow—would you sometimes go to Manhattan? Or, was that a place to which you really didn't—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Well, that was the big—that was a turning point for me, when my father would take me into Manhattan on Saturdays, and just show me what else there was out there. And I saw Times Square. I refer to this in one of these catalogues. It's a—that was an eye opener, to come out of the subway and see Times Square was just the thrill of my life. And as soon as I was old enough to go there on my own, that's when I began to go, and I learned the subway system when I was 12 or so. I was able to do that. Uh, I was off and running.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What would you say it was, say, of Times Square or of Manhattan, that you—that you think, early on, captivated you?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: It was just so unlike Brooklyn, and there was such a sense of excitement. Uh, Radio City was another place that I would hang out and just—uh, and that whole Art Deco thing was something that I just—I took to. Um, we went—I think one of the first real ideas—I say a shot in the arm, you know, inspiration for me—[00:08:00] was the World's Fair, the New York World's Fair of 1939 to '40. And I was only three and four—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, you were young.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —at the time. I seem to think we only went in the summer. I'm not really sure if that ran all year, or if they just opened it during the summer.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I'm not sure. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: But it would've been summertime when we were there. And, and so that would've meant I was three and four, two—those two years. And I was just amazed at what I was seeing. I still have visions. They're, they're foggy, but I do remember certain things about that—I've talked to other people since, and I'm not alone in this. I know other friends that have gotten into creative endeavors, and they say that this is—that was the beginning of it for them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What, uh, are some of the things that you, however foggily, recall, or think you recall?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, I remember there were certain pavilions that were—animation films, that showed how cars were put together. There were little theaters, with actual shows. There were people demonstrating things. There was a robot. Um, Tylon and Perisphere was, an amazing structure, and certainly memorable in its shape, and we went into the hemisphere. Uh, you took a winding ramp around and into this gigantic sphere. And I remember seeing something that, for years, I don't—I couldn't remember, or didn't know what it was. I saw—it was the Spirit of '76. I seem to remember—they were marching. I seem to remember them being almost drawn, almost in line, in reverse, white line against black. I don't know what that was, but the thing that got me was it seemed as though it was in mid-space. It was hanging in the middle of a space, rather than projected on a wall. And I couldn't—for years I couldn't understand it, until I finally read that that was the first showing of Cinerama. So that suddenly made some sense to me, I was getting a sense of three dimensions, I suppose.

ROBERT F. BROWN: A three-dimensional image.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yeah. But I would ask my mother about it, years later, and she didn't know what I was trying to say, or couldn't remember, or whatever. But I never got the answer until I read that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So these innovations, but they—some of these visual things, were, uh—particularly, these innovative [00:10:00] ones are what really stuck with you, as far as you can recall.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yes, yes, something that was a dimension beyond what I knew started to happen.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, and I found it very inspirational, it was, I was always trying to create something. I even tried to make my own World's Fair in the backyard. I would go out and try to do something in the old shed we had there. But just—it was a trigger. It got things started. It got my mind going. I wish I could've remembered more, but I—in a way, I wish I was five and six, rather than three and four—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Perhaps might've remembered more.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —I would've retained more—[inaudible.] Yeah. But it's, it's gotten a lot of attention recently.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. What kind of influence do you think, uh, in your early life, was your mother? What was she like?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: She was from Cleveland. Uh, she worked for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* as a secretary for a while. It was her first job, and then she came to New York, because her sister came before her—her older sister, and she followed. Uh, worked the various jobs, and one of the jobs, she met this woman who brought her home, and that's—well, it's—she met my father. So my father's sister was working with my mother, and brought my mother to her house. That's how—

ROBERT F. BROWN: I see. [Laughs.]

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: But she just did, you know, noncreative kind of things, as far as I know. Um, she worked at a—years later, when I was a kid, she worked at a Libby, McNeill & Libby as an olive packer, but she was the one that put the olives in the jars—in the formation, so that they were

in nice, neat rows, with the pimentos facing out.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I see. [Laughs.]

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: And then later became the the supervisor, so that if she found anyone else's bottle with a pimento hanging out she sent it back and had it redone. [They laugh.] So that's—and then she ended up at Merrill Lynch. Her last job, she was working at Merrill Lynch. So, she's always moving along and moving forward. But the thing I most appreciated about her was how encouraging she was to me, for me. And she made sure that my—if I was interested [00:12:00] in art, then I would have the things I needed to pursue that. She always made sure there was paper and materials, crayons, whatever it was I might want.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you were drawing, or doing—building World's Fairs in the shed or something from a very early age.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yes, I was, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And she would—yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: She would—she would encourage that, and if I would sit at the table and just either invent things, build things out of blocks or pieces of metal—whatever, or draw. I would go to church. She would—I was raised Catholic, and both my parents were—and she would take me to church, and to be sure that I was—wouldn't get restless, she would bring paper there. And I would—she'd turn me around, so that I would sort of kneel on the kneeler, but facing the seat—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, the seat.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —and the seat became my drawing board. And that kept me going for the hour. [They laugh.] Also, during grade school, she found out that there were drawing classes at the Brooklyn Museum, and so she brought me up there. Actually, she—I guess she brought me up there, and I was able to go myself. I could walk. That was a good walk, but not unreasonable, from 22nd Street to Grand Army Plaza.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And it wasn't that hazardous getting there in terms of traffic or anything.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: No, no, it was—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Not at that time.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —a pretty straight walk, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And were those classes held after school, or in the—Saturdays, or—?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: They were held on Saturdays. They were Saturdays. Saturday morning, and I guess it was a couple of hours. And I honestly don't remember how many I went to, but I do remember being with other kids, and we would move around the museum and paint. Uh, we'd draw, rather. I'd draw various subjects—pieces in the museum. Uh, and I liked that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was that pretty challenging, do you think? Or as you look back, or—?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, I remember being complimented by the instructor that I—he thought—he said that was very good. He was kind of surprised that I was able to do a little bear. It was a



sculpture of a bear. I remember that one. [They laugh.] Uh, but that's also kind of fuzzy right now, in my mind.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did this lead, then, in regular school—did you have an art program in grade school? Or not really full [ph]?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Not really. There was an art teacher that came in—I guess there was—actually came in once a week—and [00:14:00] we did drawings. I don't remember anything special about that, or even doing anything that terrific.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did they also have you work with modeling clay? Uh, that was a common kind of program.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: No, it didn't go that far at all. It was probably an hour or two a week, at most.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So fairly minimal, then.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yeah, it was.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Well, by the time you got to junior high—I guess there was a separate junior high, and then a high school or something.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: We didn't have junior high.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, you—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: I was always surprised when I first—I remember hearing about junior high and I always had trouble figuring out where it fit in. No, we just went through grammar school for eight years, and I was there from '41 to '49.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And then to high school.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: And then to high school.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And did high school—what, what—did you have special interests then, in high school, those four years?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, yes, I did. Uh, being a—being a teenager, of course, cars were a big thing, and, uh, and drawing them, and designing them. And I found out that Brooklyn Tech had a, uh, uh, an industrial design course. So that's what I took. The first two years were academics, and, and the second two were a lot of, uh, a lot of industrial design courses.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you like it?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: I loved it. That's where I discovered T-square triangles—and all the things that I guess people don't even use anymore. But for me, it was a—another revelation, that things could be diagrammed and drawn in this precise way. And there's a beauty in that, which I can show you in the other room, those, those drawings that I have pinned on the wall are based on that whole idea. I felt it all coming back to me as I worked on those.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And the beauty of—what, resolution through precision? And—?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yes, the symmetry, the balance that you can get with these few [ph] tools, and after a while you get—there's a kind of dance that happens, where your hands know exactly how to lock the T-square into position, keep sliding the triangle, and, uh—look, it's a very tactile experience. The right paper, the right, uh—well, this, this series, this is something that's in the works [00:16:00] right now, and it's been—it's been germinating for the last four years. I've had these drawings hanging on the wall back there, and I—in the—in the same position I, I remember—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yup.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —because, I'm still trying to decide where I go from here with them. Uh, I, I see them as something, but it's not clear yet whether they're going to be large canvases, small, or just draw—more drawings, or whatever, but they're, um—they were taken from an engineers' textbook, a book that shows how to do these kind of drawings. So here I was, putting myself right back into this, this world that I remember from high school.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, I brought more to it, but I took those drawings and I—in, in the—in the case where there was some perspective, I eliminated perspective. I used the, the, uh, the triangles to give me consistent angles and parallel lines. And I added shading, and, and the light source, so that I had—I had given—put them in context, put them on a—in a place, where that—where they could cast a shadow and so forth. And that's—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Uh, what you're describing is sometimes called, uh—or was called mechanical drawing, wasn't—?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Exactly. Should have said that—[inaudible.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: But, for you—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: No, it's better you didn't, because for you it wasn't simply a mechanical, uh, process, was it? It seems to me you, you were—you were fascinated by the wonder of what could be realized.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yes, that's right. No, it was anything but mechanical. Uh, and I find—what I'm doing, what I'm—what I think these, these pieces will be about, when they finally materialize, is, uh, is that area—working in that area between representational image-making and diagram, the space between, so—they can be both. And that—these typewriters I'm starting, I'm doing now, also have that sort of—I've eliminated the perspective, and the vanishing points, fan the lines out so they're parallel. So you're seeing something that has glints of light, and casts shadows, and highlights, and all of that, and yet it's a diagram. It's a—it distorts itself, and [00:18:00] compresses itself to the surface. Uh, I'm compelled to do this at this point, and I don't even know why, but the—but I find that the idea of the perspective that I've been doing for so many years bothers me. I, I just don't want it as part of the work anymore. I shouldn't say forever, but, uh—you know, for the time being, I'm discarding that aspect.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, the—and perhaps a wonderful tension between the two things, and this—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yeah, there is a tension. That's what I like about it. There—that's exactly

right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. And somehow you were probably unconsciously aware of that when you were doing this industrial design program as a teenager.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: I was, but I was taking it a different direction. I think I was trying to find out how many—how many images would come out of this process, what I—what I could do with these triangles—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Ah, okay—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —at this—how, how far could I play with this mixing 30, 60 angles with 45s, and where does it all lead? And that, that took me into algebra. I—I'm not a—uh, geometry, I mean. Uh, or actually I found geometry was, was my best—I never cared about math. I was never very good at it. But geometry was something else, because it really wasn't math. If you thought of it that, that way, you had it wrong. It wasn't a mathematical process, and yet it kept getting lumped in with that. It was something also in between, uh, modes of thinking.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Logic, and reasoning, and all that. Applied to diagrams.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative], which are Turner-derived, or, uh, from representation, or can be found in nature, right?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: It's all there, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Huh. So, this fascinated you very early on.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: It's the universality about it, so it's like chess in a way. You can discuss this with anybody, anywhere.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. And did you discuss it at that time? Do you recall, uh—? Or was it—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, uh, no, I remember being, uh—I remember going home, and, and going beyond what the assignments were, taking a—looking at the, uh—those extra things that they always put in the back of the chapter—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative], Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —if you're really interested, you can do these, like, for [00:20:00] extra credit or, or not—but you can do them. And I would do them, because I just wanted to see how far this would go. Uh, I was disappointed recently to find that things have changed. I couldn't wait to help my kids when they had geometry, and I was having trouble with it, because here I thought at least that was set for a while. But everything shifts and changes. They're using different terminology, and approaching things differently, and it just wasn't the old thing that I remembered.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. You worked with a fairly rigid textbook, which you began with proofs, right, and—?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yes. Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And once you finished—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: It was a little, little—[inaudible].

ROBERT F. BROWN: —axioms by the, uh, end of it.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were thinking then, uh, at that time, of going further then, as a designer, or not necessarily?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, at that point I was, but by the time I graduated from high school, I, I thought—I wasn't, uh—I wasn't at all, uh, rigid about that. I thought, I'm, I'm ready for anything, any kind of art. And I went to a, a small, uh, employment agency, and I told them I just wanted to do art. They said, "What kind?" I said, "I really don't care, anything." So they said, "Well, we know about an advertising agency that's looking for somebody." This is how careers start, right? So, next thing I know, I'm, I'm over there with this little portfolio I put together, and, uh, they said, "We have a space in the—in the, uh, mailroom, if you're interested." Uh, I was there in the mailroom for, I think, a week and a half, and there was an opening in the—at the bull—what they called the bullpen of the, uh, art department—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Okay.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —where, where you would mount—I would mount things, and file art, that sort of thing. And so, almost immediately, I was, I was placed in the middle of this environment.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was this also in Brooklyn, or—?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: This was in New York.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In New York.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: It was an agency called Hicks & Greist, and it was my first full-time job.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And this was right after h—Brooklyn Tech.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Right. Yeah. During high school, the early couple of years of high school, I was on visits to Cleveland. We used to go out there quite a bit. I suppose we went out there maybe once every three years or something like that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [00:22:00] Your mother's family members, yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: My mother's family [ph]. See, they lived in a big Victorian house. I don't mean big, I mean, just a—it was really a standard Victorian house, but to me it was big, coming from this rowhouse. And it was also very exotic, to think that there were—there were driveways between these houses. I just—

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: I just thought I was going to paradise. This—there was a front lawn. It was green around the house. It was beyond anything I knew in Brooklyn. So that was a thrill. Um, but I had—it's—I had a couple of summer jobs during high school, and when I was out there, for two summers in a row I worked at a, a chrome plating plant. Nickel and chrome plating. I was even underage at that—[laughs]—point. That was 14, and 15, that was.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And couldn't the work be incredibly dangerous? At least, not necessarily?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, well, not necessarily. Uh, the—I wasn't too close to the acids and things. There were there nickel platers, well, who I remember had to wear asbestos gloves to handle the metals that came out of that, but I don't—I mean that didn't—as far as I could see, it didn't have much effect on me. I hated the job, I could tell you that. [They laugh.] Uh, and I also worked in a candy factory in, uh, in Brooklyn, at Bush, Bush Terminal. And that was, uh, Quaker-made [ph] candy. Uh, for one summer.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, how long did you stay with this, uh, advertising agency in Manhattan?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: I was there for two and a half years, and I was 17 when I joined there. I graduated when I was 17, and I went right into this job. It started as a summer job. That's what I was looking for. But I ended up doing artwork early on, and, and, and learning so much, that I thought, well, this is—this is interesting. What should I do? Should I stay here, or go back to school? And at that point, Pratt Institute, where I had applied, offered me a full four-year scholarship.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: And I was torn. I just—I didn't know whether to actually shift gears and go back into school again for four years, or should I stay in this job? And I—my parents were [00:24:00] absolutely no help in this regard. They just didn't know what I wanted, or did—didn't know what advice to give me, so they gave me none.

ROBERT F. BROWN: They perhaps—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: I don't blame them for that. They just didn't know.

ROBERT F. BROWN: They didn't know whether—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: I asked people, like what—I asked the art directors—they're mature people that have been in the career for years, and they didn't know—

ROBERT F. BROWN: No?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —[inaudible] to me. So—

ROBERT F. BROWN: There was no—it wasn't clear that if you went to Pratt and got a, a high—a higher degree, it wouldn't help you in a career. It wasn't clear to them, or—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: No, it didn't seem to be. Because I was honest in spelling out how I felt. I said, "I like where I am. I like this job. Should I go back to school?" I think, if I were in their place now, when I look back, and I think I would've said go to school. You can always come back to this, you know? I was going to get a four-year scholarship. But no one ever said that to me. I didn't take it. So, I ended up staying at this place.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: I regret this. I, I think that—I wonder what would've happened if I had stayed in—four years at Pratt. It would've been a different story altogether. Maybe it wouldn't have been—maybe things wouldn't have worked out as well, because, as it turned out, I had to teach myself a lot of things, and I learned through other, other worlds. I took methods that I used in terms

of image-making, that I learned in the—in the advertising business by working with photographers, and with type people, lettering people. Took all that information, processed it, and used that as my approach to making images, rather than the standard classroom advice.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. And these things—these experiences came—you were assigned them. I mean, so they—one could follow another, and then there'd be a hiatus, and you'd try something else, or be assigned something else, right?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: That's true.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Inaudible].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: That's true, but you had—but I would develop a way—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were learning.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: I was doing things—for instance, cropping photographs for something.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: And working with the photographers, having—looking through cameras, and—it all gave me material, and, and means of making images that I may not have picked up in school, for all I know. I have to rationalize this a little bit. But I do, in a way, wish I had gone to Pratt.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well you did, then. Later, then.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: I did later, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [00:26:00] But there was a hiatus.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: But I didn't—I never—I was never a full-day student, on campus. That, that didn't happen.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. I wonder, though, if there was an immediacy—a pressure, almost, at the ad agency, that you wouldn't—of a different sort than you would've had in at Pratt.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Pressure in what way? What do you mean?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, I mean the pressure of getting jobs done, of meeting deadlines, of—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, that came later. Uh, I was still pretty young, and I was learning, and, uh—every day I learn something. You just—you couldn't help but learn. It was all new to me. Um, but after two and a half years of that, I was getting a little bored of it. I'd found that I was—I was 20. Um, I didn't—I wasn't enthralled with the idea that I could just be this for the rest of my life. And I didn't know quite what to do about it. At that time—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You weren't designing, then. You were doing what others were passing on, is that right? You were—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: I was doing the, the more menial end of it. I was, uh—yes. that's right. I wasn't really designing. I was mounting things. They would give me—once in a while they would give me a little layout to do, and that was sort of fun, small. If it less important, and they, they were busy, then I would do less [ph] layouts. Uh, but I wasn't an art director by any means. Um—the, uh—there

was a draft at that point, and they were taking people up until the age of 25. I knew people later that I met that were drafted at the age of 25. And that didn't seem very appealing to me, to get that far into your life, and then suddenly be lifted out of there and in the army for a couple years.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: So they—they had just come up with a, with this, uh, system where you could push your number, your draft number up. You could advance your draft. Instead of waiting to be drafted for the two years—the choice before that was you either waited until they came for you, or you joined, and that meant the next two years—three—draft—three-year, uh enlistment. So, you could push your number up and go for two years, and that's just what I did. —I remember being the —[00:28:00] on the beach with a couple of friends, and—Coney Island, and, just, just bored to tears. And I said, "I gotta—I gotta do something with my life." So, when we got back—I didn't say anything to them, I just—we all said goodbye and I just kept walking past my house, and I went down to the local draft ward, and I—[laughs]—signed on. And within about three months, I was in the Army.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Had you told your—talked about this with your parents at all? Not really.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: No. I don't think—I don't remember discussing it with them. I think I just did it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did it.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. 'Cause it was an inevitable condition hovering over you—you and other young men.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yeah, I just—I just—[inaudible]—I'm gonna get this over with, I'm just gonna—[inaudible]—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. So what did you, uh, end up—did you have a choice at all, or—?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Well, this is the other strange thing. —they, uh—they, they sent—I'm trying to remember where this was. Would it have been, uh—would it have been down at Whitehall Street at that point, or—? I guess it was Whitehall.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Whitehall in Lower Manhattan, yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yeah, they—at that point, they were also drafting into the Navy. Now this was really strange, because that had never been done before. And the last thing I wanted was to be on a ship somewhere. —I just couldn't—I couldn't abide by that, that kind of thing, a two-year program, where I'd be sailing. I wanted my feet on solid ground. I'm not a swimmer, and I'm just—it's not for me. And here we're walking—we're in line, going up to this desk, and there's, there's one person, one man sitting there, with these two rubber stamps. And he's stamping each as they—as, as we bring our papers up to him, he stamps it, "Army," or "Navy." And it wasn't one and the other, one and the other. Sometimes, there'd be three Navys in a row, or, maybe two Armys, then a Navy, and then three—so it was—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Wow. [Laughs.]

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —totally arbitrary, depending on which stamp he felt like picking up. I was

terrified. [Laughs.] And I was never so relieved as when he stamped "Army" on those papers. Hot damn.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Huh. Now, when was this? Mid-50s?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: That was '55. December of '55.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So then did you—?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: And so—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were shipped off—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —luckily, I was—I went through—I was processed through Fort Dix—

ROBERT F. BROWN: New Jersey, yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Sent to, uh, uh, Fort Jackson, [00:30:00] South Carolina, for basic training.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: And then up to Fort Monmouth for ten weeks of photo lab. The training was in photo—[Cross talk.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, so you were at—they did assign you to something appropriate, something your experience could—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Up to that point they had it right, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. [Laughs.]

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Something visual. Uh, then they shipped me over to France, to Orléans, and there were different—there was headquarters, which is beautiful, in the center of town, and then there were these boondocks, these places way out in the mud, and one of these places were La—was La Chapelle, it was called, and that's where they sent me, because I had this photo lab ability, and that's where the photo labs were. There were Quonset huts. I don't even remember if they had—I don't think they had sidewalks; it was just mud and, it was—it was awful. And I got out there—the first day, I thought, this is—this is gonna be something, and almost two years of, of this experience. You couldn't even get into town if you needed anything [ph]. There were special buses you had to wait for. And the first day, someone came in calling my name. And, uh, he said, "There's a Major Walker wants to see you, at headquarters." And I went in. They—he had looked at my, my file, and saw that I had some art experience, and he needed somebody to make maps at headquarters. I was saved. [They laugh.] And that was, don't get me wrong, I still hated the Army, and it was two long years of, of this experience, but at least I was in a place in town, in Orléans, France, and that was as, as cheerful as it could possibly be—I mean, this—[inaudible]—within the Army, in that context.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. And do you—do you think, in fact, you learned something?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, I did. Oh, yes, I did. That, that really—the Army really became my campus. I mean, the Army in Europe—being in Europe was a, a big experience for me. Uh, so, anyway, that might've made up for the Pratt, the lack of a Pratt education.



ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you get to travel a little bit while you were in Europe, or—?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, a lot—I did travel a lot.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Quite a lot.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: I was—what I tried to do, I worked out a whole strategy where [00:32:00] if you take a, a long enough weekend, if you can get out a day earlier, and come back a day later, tacked on to a weekend—in other words, add—leave time, instead of taking a week or two weeks together, I would just take a few days at a time, and make the weekends longer.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: And that was enough time to pop over to Paris, certainly—I did that a lot—but also to London, uh, Madrid, to places like that. So it was—it was a—it was a real education in itself. Um, I made maps there, uh—the maps were not what you would think. These were huge murals, mural-sized maps that were on tracks. There were walls that slid out at the front of a, a conference room, what they called the war room. And the brass would sit there, and discuss logistics. That was in G-4—it was—it was called Communications Zone. They, they referred to it as Comms Z, which was—and G-4 was the logistics section.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were given a lot of data, and you had to assemble it into a map? Or you'd take existing maps, and then—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Took existing maps. It, it was really a map to be s—to be seen and pointed at. All we had to do was get the key places. And, uh, and so it was—it lent itself to a lot of discussions and a lot of meetings. I remember one I—we did with—it was a large map of France—we dealt with all of Europe, but there was one, one of France by itself, and my—I set up a challenge for myself, and that was to do the entire map without any curved lines. So, the entire coastline was made up of short—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Ha!

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —straight, jagged lines. And I—and the colonel, at one of the meetings, referred to me as a Left Bank artist. I was—[they laugh]. I don't think he was entirely happy with it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, I see, you were a bit, uh, radical for him.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: And this is—it was Cubist map, and it was—

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.] You had to start from scratch, then, sometimes, for these maps.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yeah, Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT F. BROWN: They'd be wiped clean. And were these, uh—were you [00:34:00] at the m—you weren't at the meetings, I suppose? I mean, the brass were—that was off, off limits.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: No, that one I was for some reason. I don't know why I was there, even, but I remember him saying that in front of these other people. But normally, no, I wouldn't be a part of the meeting. And that was just—[inaudible.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And these were all for training exercises and so forth.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Exactly, right. Hypothetical situations, what would happen if.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Right. Yeah. Was Orléans the headquarters at that point of—?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: That was headquarters.

ROBERT F. BROWN: For the—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: For that Comms Z, yes. Just—[inaudible.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And in terms of, uh, your art, or in terms of graphic experi—experience with graphics, did this further it any way, would you say, at all, or—?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: I'm sure it did. Uh, all these things sort of, uh, uh, were put in a pot, and became my, my material, and processes to work with. Uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were there guidelines, uh—? I suppose there must have been, in the m—being the military, but on the other hand, couldn't—did you—was there a good deal of latitude, or s—?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: There was a lot of latitude, uh, and there was a long time. I—it just—there were only so many maps you could make, and they didn't know what else to do, and so we were overstaffed. There were three or four of us up in this garret. It was—it was the top floor of this building, too, so no one ever wanted to climb the stairs to come all the way up there. So, it was pretty private. And it was like a—uh, it was like a garret. The beams and the ceiling were just above us, yeah. Uh, so I, I did a lot of my own work. That was—I was inspired by visits to Paris, and, uh, just being in Europe, and the culture that surrounded me, and so, I thought, I'm really—if I'm an artist, I should be making art. I should be doing more of this, and—and I experimented with drawing. I still have a little sketch I did of a—of a, a building in Paris, out the window from a hotel I stayed, and things like that. I—either on trips I would take a sketchpad, or would draw in the, uh—at the headquarters. And so, I was teaching myself as I went, and looking, always looking. I remember the first time, the first trip to Paris, uh, there was an—there were several movies, and I—the first—I have to say it's the first two trips, because I don't remember exactly which one was which—I think the first time I went up I saw, uh, *Le Monde du Silence* [00:36:00] the Jean Cocteau.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: I mean Cousteau, Jacques, Jacques Cousteau—[inaudible.] And, um, then another one was *Mysteries—The Mysteries of Picasso*. Uh, and these things always—they just seemed so much more, uh, special, being seen in Paris than they would've been if I'd seen them in Brooklyn, I think. [They laugh.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: So there was a romantic notion, perhaps, of that way.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: There was a definitely a romantic notion, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Were your—your own drawings and all, were they essentially recordings, or sketches from what you'd seen, or were looking at?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Trying to faithfully—?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yes. Sometimes sitting in a café and sketching something across the way.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Now, you've mentioned the experience of being in Europe and traveling. What, as you look back, was it that, uh, apart from going to Paris, and the associations of it, with the bohemian life, or whatever—uh, what else in Europe was there, do you think, that, uh, influenced you, or was—had an impact on you at that time? [Inaudible.]

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, meeting other artists. Meeting people that were up there with me in that—in that garret situation.

ROBERT F. BROWN: They were also people with art backgrounds.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: With—people with an art background, and, and spoke a language that I wasn't hearing in Brooklyn. I was—I was the odd man out in Brooklyn. I was the only artist in—within however many blocks.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: So here were—here were other people I could discuss ideas with, and, oh, they would suggest films, or we'd talk about books or whatever. And so a chance to trade ideas, where you knew you were being understood, and also where you could learn, yeah. That was exciting. That part was—things balance out. I hated the rest of it, the formations and all the discipline part, but that—I found that very helpful. And a major part of my growth, I think. I wonder what would have happened if I was just, say, stationed in the Midwest someplace [00:38:00] with—the idea of just being there in France, just, just that alone was enough to, to spark things. I did a mural in the mess hall. They asked me to do that, and so I did a view of the town, with the cathedral. Not a great mural, but I did it. I filled the space. [They laugh.] I'm sure it's been covered over by now—[inaudible]—painted by now.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. So you were glad when you were mustered out, then. That would've been what, in '57 or so?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Well, I did something I never dreamed I would do: at the end of the—my two years—as my two years was coming to the end, I realized that I hadn't seen as many foreign cities as I wanted to see. So, in other words, there were other European cities I wanted to—and so I—they had what they called—these were the Eisenhower years, and they came up with something called the Austerity Program, and that was where, if they had somebody already shipped over and in place at any particular base, you were allowed to extend your stay there. It didn't have to be for a year, which is the normal, the way it was up to that point. Then they dropped it to six months. But at the time I was there, they dropped it all the way to three months. So, I had an option: I got a chance to—you know, it's risky, because you don't know what's going to happen in that next three months. Here you have a chance to get out and, you were afraid that if you stayed a little too long, you may get involved in who knows what kind of—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Some other—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: A war.

ROBERT F. BROWN: War.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yeah. And things were—this was the Cold War. Things were always—

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you could get—could've gotten out ear—and did—could get out early.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Well, I decided to go for the three months. And that gave me the chance to see these other cities.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In other words, you were freed from being—staying in Orléans for—you could get out. You could—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: No, I could stay in Orléans, but I still had—but I had other leave time, and then I would have additional couple days—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, I'm see.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —because of another three months. And it gave me those days that I needed to—I think it was Copenhagen was one of the places I wanted to see, and the other was, I think, Madrid. [00:40:00] Those two cities that I hadn't quite gotten to yet. And here was my chance, so I did that. Uh, still based in Orléans for those extra three months, and then came back. And I found out later that within—I think it was within two weeks after I was out of there and back home, Jordan flared up. It was an—there was a situation there. And my entire company was called out to Jordan. So, I just—I missed that by the skin of my teeth, and in fact, a busload of people on its way out—it was one of the buses, carrying people I knew, I was with—had a head-on collision with a French truck coming the other way. And the two sergeants in the front were killed, and there were many broken arms and legs on the bus.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Gee.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: It was a crazy situation.

ROBERT F. BROWN: When you'd go to these various European cities, were you by now going to look at art, or art museums? Or just in general, get an idea of the nature of the cities?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Mostly the nature of the cities. I did go to museums, but I—but it was mostly just the thrill of being in an entirely different culture. The architecture, the street and all that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And they were very dis—they were each distinctive, certainly.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: From one—one from the other, absolutely, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yes. Yeah, that was a—there's no way to get that without doing it. And it was very enjoyable and very educational.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. And you—in, in the military, did they—did you have, uh, means enough? I mean, the pay was adequate so that you could do things on the cheap, but you could—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: No, it wasn't. No, no, it wasn't adequate. What would happen is I'd always want to go up to Paris, and right after payday, you could certainly get up there that first time, the first weekend, but then—it was every 30 days you get paid. Well that was it. [They laugh.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, I see.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: That was it for the next three weeks, until you got paid again. But I

bought one of these great—you know those maps that have every building? There's one of Manhattan, uh—it unfolds to about—I guess about four feet or so, and then you can see every building in Manhattan? Well, they had one of Paris, too. I think that might have been the first one. [00:42:00] So I would just stretch that out in the room, and take a walk—take imaginary walks, or, or even sit with someone else who knew Paris, and talk about it, and we'd explore Paris by looking at the map.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Right.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Not quite the same thing, but at least—I'd keep it in mind.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. But it got to the point where you knew just what you wanted to do and see.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: That's right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Did you take in contemporary art exhibitions? Did you go to galleries at all at that point?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, yes. There, there was the Modern—Museum of Modern Art there, and I don't remember going to the galleries as much as the museums. I don't think I did go to the galleries, because I wasn't thinking of—along those lines at that point. I still hadn't decided I would be a painter. I just knew I liked art and cities and architecture. So the museums, yes, but not the galleries. That happened later. That really started when I was in—when I came back, I got a job at Young & Rubicam, which was another advertising—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, big ad—a big one.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: They—at that point, they were the third largest—[inaudible]. Um—

ROBERT F. BROWN: And was the job—comparable to the one you'd had before?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: No, it was better. I was an assistant art director immediately, and then became an art director shortly after that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: As an art director, what did you do? Maybe you can explain.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Well I had particular accounts that were assigned to me, and then I worked on the ads, designed the ads, designed—worked with the copywriters, collaborated on the idea. Once we arrived at a concept, whether it was one ad or a series, sell it to the client, or try to sell it to the client. We might not be able to do that, so you go back, and just come up with other ideas. Uh, once that was approved, then carried through—follow through and get the ad made. Hire a photographer. Choose your type. Set the type. Photo lettering in those days. [00:44:00] Computers changed that whole business model, obviously, but it was very satisfying in a lot of ways, so—and it was all graphic. It wasn't—I always like to make that clear, that it wasn't—I wasn't an illustrator. When I was in advertising, I wasn't doing illustration at all. I never—I was never interested in that idea. I did graphics, the two-dimensional movement of—I mean, to me, Futurist, and, I mean, the Russian, you know, the Russian, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Constructivist and all that, yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —Constructivist and all that was sort of more interesting to me than

anything illustration.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. This was all for print media, right? I mean, at that time, or—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: All print at that point, yes. Later, when I transferred out with Y&R [ph] to Los Angeles, and there I was doing TV as well as print, and that was also an education.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Um, did you think you might stick with this indefinitely at that point? Or did you—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: At that point, I did, yes. And I could have. Um, it was interesting enough to become a life's work, I suppose. But I think I could see what was going to happen, and if you stayed too long—unless you owned a company—unless it's your agency or your studio, things change. Ideas change, and it's a young business, and so—

ROBERT F. BROWN: And so you'd be replaced, or you would be—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Eventually, sure, unless I made the effort to run my own shop, which was feasible. That could've happened, too. But I started thinking more and more about it, and I thought—I really should—I really should paint. Uh, and the thing that—you were asking about galleries, going to galleries. That's where I started to go to the galleries, in New York.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Having met other art directors. Young & Rubicam had about 20—

[END OF TRACK.]

This is tape one of two, side B.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [00:00:00] So Young & Ru had about 25 of you art directors, so—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yeah, yeah. And when they promoted me from assistant art director to art director, I was 25. I was the youngest art director they had had up to that point. Since then they—art directors can be 21, 22, 20. Uh, that was a big deal.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And did peo—some people had stayed in as art directors into middle age or later, you mean?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yes, sure, mm-hmm [affirmative]. No, but I mean to become an art director at that age, it was, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, it was a remarkable, or remarked on.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: So, ahead of—yeah, I was a little bit ahead there, but—I was going to art galleries with friends, at lunch hour, and and seeing the possibilities, seeing what could be done other than just advertising. And then the revelation was the show at Sidney Janis in 1962 called *New Realists*. And that was the Hopper show. That's when everything opened up to me. That, that—yeah, I sort of skipped over something here, which is what—the first thing I start with when I do a lecture, and that is my discovery of Hopper.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I was going to ask.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: And of a particular painting, *Early Sunday Morning*. And if we want to be sequential here, I should mention that first—

ROBERT F. BROWN: That's fine.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —because I saw that when I was 12. And that was when I realized that there was something happening here as far as painting goes, and that this was the surprise to me, the true revelation, was that painting could actually speak to you. There could be something—it's something being said to you other than just the act of looking at a picture. There was a communication.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, because the subject is a banal one, isn't it? An urban—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Very, very much so. Uh, but it's—and you have to remember, I didn't—I mean, this wasn't an image that, at that point, was very well known. It might've been well known in the art world, but it hadn't been [00:02:00] turned into posters. Uh, it wasn't on a front cover of any telephone book—

ROBERT F. BROWN: No.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —as it was years later. Uh, so, I had never seen it. And I walk in to 12th Street, and I see this painting across the room. I remember the moment—

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was at the Whitney Museum.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: At the Whitney Museum. And I just—it just changed everything for me. I know that it changed my life. I know that that was a pivotal moment. I just learned a silent language, that there was—that this existed. It wasn't just a picture on the wall of something. And I wonder now how much of that was recognition, because I used to sit on the front steps of my—of our house on 22nd Street and draw the row houses across the street. That would've been about the same vintage as those buildings in the Hopper painting. So it may have been some of that, too. I mean, here was somebody doing it in a big way.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, and it wasn't simply illustrational.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: No. No, it was definitely something else. Well, that was a start. That was a seed that was planted, and it took 16 years for me to actually paint. From that moment, it took me 16 years to get around to actually working with paint on canvas. So, in a way, I was a late starter. Um—anyway, I just wanted to get that established.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, no, no. Well, now, the Sidney Janis show you saw in '62.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Right. And that—this was the middle years of being at Y&R in New York. I was there from, I guess it was '58 to '61. No, 50—[inaudible.] Fifty-nine to '64—[inaudible].

ROBERT F. BROWN: And at that—uh, those years, you were also then going, what, part-time to Pratt, to Pratt Institute?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: That—yes. I actually—it was coincidental, but I, the day that I started Y&R, my very first day there was the first night that I started at Pratt. It just so happened to coincide. Um, [00:04:00] so I—the whole time that I was at Y&R, that five years—[inaudible]—at Y&R during the day, and I was going to Pratt at night, two, three, or four nights—[inaudible]. Uh, and

at the end of that, they asked if I was interested in going to Los Angeles, because they wanted somebody—New York talent, New York—[inaudible]—in that office—[inaudible]. And so, I [inaudible]. At that point I was single. I think that's probably one of the reasons they asked me, too, is I was easier to move than a family. Uh, so they—I said—[inaudible].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Well, had you learned—excuse me, back to Pratt, just for a moment—what, what did you get out of Pratt, would you say, those—going to evening school for over—'59 to '63?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, I got quite a bit. I don't know if I could say specifically what it was. I remember, toward the end, it was—it started as an advertising design course. That was two years. Um, and I had a degree from that, which was an Associate's degree. And then I switched over to the fine arts program, and fell short of getting a B.A. by just about two credits, probably three or five credits or something like that, which I never made up. Because when I got—and the reason I stopped going to Pratt was the transfer. It all ended at the same time. Well, when I got out to Los Angeles, I looked into continuing and just getting those last few credits, they had all kinds of courses they wanted me to take: civics courses, and the history of California. I just—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You didn't have the stomach for that.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —I didn't feel—[inaudible]. No, no.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Whereas at Pratt you hadn't had to do anything like that. You could jump right into your specialty.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: If I had just stayed another six months, I would've had that degree.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. And what was the fine arts program like at Pratt? What, what did that—? Was that sculpture painting?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: There was a man named John Rawlings [ph] there at the time, who—you know, all I can remember is a lot of discussions—[00:06:00] we made projects. We brought things in that were made, but nothing that you would expect. It was always made out of some other materials, or, because it had a more conceptual bent to it. It wasn't painting. I don't—I didn't do any painting. Here was a fine arts program; I did no painting. Um, it was mostly ideas. It was all conceptual, and somehow, in some way, implementing the idea. You bring something in that had to do with whatever it was—[inaudible]. I remember bringing in a huge plywood piece with about a thousand marbles that rolled out, a sort of theater experience, a theatrical experience. Uh, it was fascinating, and after work—or after school we would go out to for beers at a local place in the Village—[inaudible]. They would let you sit out in the back [ph], and that was a new kind of school for me. I didn't know that school could be—that education could be that much fun at that point, that relaxed. I'm sorry it didn't—I didn't complete it, because I got so close. But that's what I remember about Pratt, and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you had—it was a very open-ended, sounded like a very liberal kind of training.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: It was very liberal. Yes, I wonder how far that went afterwards. It was a new thing at the time. I was just—I've always been curious as to how far they carried that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hmm. Yeah. You and each student would kind of bring in things that were sort of—discuss what they were—had in mind—



ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —and there would be free discussion.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Freeform?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: [Inaudible.]

[Audio break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: John Rawlings.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: John Rawlings would throw out a phrase, or a statement, and he wouldn't say any more about it, and that was our assignment. And I remember one that he had was traffic patterns, dance, and there was a third one [00:08:00]. Traffic patterns, dance, magic. And that was it. So I took some blackboard, and I made—here's this mechanical drawing in T-square triangle thing coming back, because I made a series of 45-degree slots, evenly spaced, so that there'd be blackboard, and then a white hole cut in it, in the blackboard. And that I put on tracks, which slid over another board that had vertical stripes. And so, you would get a moire as this thing—the traffic patterns were the diagonals, and the—I mean they were both sets of stripes, really, because of what you see on the street, these marks—pedestrian marks. But as they crossed each other, they formed a moire. So you'd get these diamond shapes that would run up and down, sideways, and—so there was a sort of dance forming of magic. [They laugh.] I thought it was a fairly elegant way of —

ROBERT F. BROWN: Indeed.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —putting it all together.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And did it meet approval?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: He liked it, yeah. He liked it, I think. But that kind of thinking was, I think, beneficial to me, to spend some time with that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. Well, much of your training to this point, then, was almost conceptual or intellectual, wasn't it? Uh, mechanical, but the intellectual interest—I mean, you weren't getting these so-called traditional fundamentals of drawing and painting and this and that.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: No, I wasn't getting any—

ROBERT F. BROWN: And do you think it mattered?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —instruction in painting at all. No, it didn't. In fact, it mattered in a good way, I think, because I had to teach myself to paint. I—when I got to LA, I did take— Okay, since we're on the subject of education—

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —I did say I wanted to get into night school. I mean, I did want—when I was in LA, I tried this other thing of picking up the credits, and that wasn't going to work, but I thought, well, I want to study with somebody. And the big word around town at that point, around

the art circles, [00:10:00] was Robert Irwin, who was teaching, apparently, had decided to teach. I signed up for a class with him—this was a slight, small brush that I had with Irwin—but we went—I went to the classroom, and he was sitting behind the desk, and some other people came in, and we had a great discussion, just talked about all the ways there are to make art, all the possibilities, just infinite. I showed him some slides. I was there alone with him for a while, so I showed him some slides of things I had just started doing. These were my very first paintings that I had pictures of. And he said, "Well there's obviously something happening here." And that's as far as he got, but that was nice to hear. At least I was getting some feedback. Uh, but the second class, I received a notice that he wasn't—the class was cancelled, because it wasn't big enough, and you couldn't—the school couldn't afford to carry it. So it was over, and I went to Ferus Gallery, which was his gallery at the time, and they gave me his home number and studio number. I called him, discussed the idea with him. I said, "I'd really like"—I was ready to go one-on-one with him, if he would do that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: But he wasn't go—he decided, since it was canceled, he was going to devote the time to this newest thing he was doing. He was developing a new series of paintings. Um, and I know exactly where those—what those were now. But maybe in the future sometime. Well, it never happened. So, again, I wonder what would have happened if I had spent time with someone that conceptual, what I would be doing today. I have no idea. Um, so, now so far there's no painting from my education whatsoever. But Emerson Woelffer was teaching. And he was teaching

ROBERT F. BROWN: He was teaching where at that time?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: At that—I think that was Chouinard that I was at, and the two of them were teaching at the same time. And he knew that I—that he was sort of second-choice, that I'd left Irwin. Well, not left him, but that it fell through. So I did a painting class with Emerson Woelffer. [00:12:00] I don't remember learning a thing there, to tell you the truth. I just—I made paintings, but I didn't get anything out of it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. And as a teacher, he wasn't particularly memorable or anything.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: No, he was a nice person, and—but I never felt like he was showing me how to do anything. [They laugh.] One time I brought in two canvases and I tried to do two paintings in one night. I think I kind of put him off a little. [They laugh.] Almost got there, too, and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: I see. You thought you could just slide right through this thing.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Just whip through this.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So it became kind of a tedium after—I mean, you'd signed up, so you followed through with it, but—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Well, it was a chance for me to make some images, and work paint—move paint around and that. So in that sense, I was practicing getting something done. But I was already painting in—when I left New York, I had done—the first painting I did was 1963. Uh, and then another one followed that. So, there were two paintings I did in this New York apartment. I lived on East 55th Street. Uh, these were done on weekends, when I wasn't working at the agency, the Y&R. And I started a third painting called *Nedick's*, which was a—you know, a hotdog chain.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sure, hotdog chain.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: And that's when the transfer took place. So, I brought that out to California with me. I finished it out there. But what I left—when I left New York, I had exactly two and a half paintings under my belt.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: And then once I got out there, I got an apartment with a bedroom, which I never used as a bedroom. I set it up as a studio, and had a fold-out couch in the living room. And so that's where I got—I did random things. I was just moving around town, looking for subjects, and put this pretty mixed array together. And eventually had a show at Molly Barnes' gallery. Matter of fact, my first three shows were at Molly Barnes' gallery, in '68, '69, and '70, [00:14:00] one each year.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, you began showing fairly soon? Or taking them around to be seen?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yeah. I'd take them around. That was something—I would—I had a little Triumph TR4 at that time, '64. And I would get a bunch of slides together, and Jane was with me out there at that point. She—we met at Y&R, New York, and then she came to California.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, and I would have her come with me—no appointments, mind you; I'd just take these slides of my work and drive around from gallery to gallery, and she'd sit in the car while I'd jump out and go in, see if I could show my slides to somebody. [Laughs.] That's how casual it all was. And I connected with Molly. She had just started opening—she had started her business. The gallery was relatively new at that point. And she was looking for artists, and she liked what she saw, so we had our shows [ph].

[Audio break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Talk a bit about the work that you were doing. You did two and a half paintings, you said—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —before you left New York for Los Angeles. Uh, this is one here, *Herald*. So, this is from about when? Nineteen—?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Sixty-three.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sixty-three. And it, it looks to be a—either a collage or almost a trompe l'oeil painting. It's extremely—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: That was trompe l'oeil, I had that in mind. Um, the—I had been thinking about doing something like this, and challenging myself to painting as realistically as I could—as I knew how, and working with oil and brush. I had never done it. I wanted to see how adept I could be with it. And so I kept putting it off, and there was one—I remember one weekend there was a very heavy night of partying. I guess it was a Friday night, went on too long. And the next morning I was heading back—[laughs]—from that party in the cab, going back to my apartment, and I passed a demolition site on 3rd Avenue. And I was feeling pretty bad. All I wanted to do was sleep the morning away somewhere. And I see all this demolished wood, timber, lumber laying around, [00:16:00] and I thought, oh, this is what I want. I want a couple of boards to mount these elements

on. And so I thought, this is—it's time. It's time to stop fooling around and get to work.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: So that was a turning point for me. Big party, sleep it off, and then first thing I did was walk up to that site and pick up a couple of these boards. Because these are—these things aren't available in the middle of New York, necessarily. So, I got them back to the apartment

ROBERT F. BROWN: Weathered, tattered boards, huh?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yes. Uh, so that's how it started. I assembled this thing as a model, and I painted it there in the studio. It was my first painting. At the age of 28. Kind of a late start.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now, what were you trying to do, you think? Suggest your life? Suggest your surroundings?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, I thought I would just put things together that I was interested in, without reasoning too far. I didn't want to know exactly why I was interested. Uh, for instance, I liked the letter forms of the *Herald*, and something that I felt would be lasting and—and I think almost immediately the *Herald-Tribune* went out, closed. [They laugh.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. And playing card, aviators glasses, open book of matches, and a bracelet or something like that.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yeah, it's just a ring, a keyring—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Keyring.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —hanging on a pushpin, and a pair of sunglasses.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And this, um—was the big challenge the medium? I mean, so you said you were just—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —you were—and you were essentially teaching yourself to work in oils, is that right?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Exactly. So, I made the image the same size as the subject, and worked that up. I was pleased with the way—I still have this. We have the painting in the house. We kept it. But I was pleased with—it worked out, and that I could do it. The next one was a brownstone which was across the street from that same apartment, which was East 55th.

ROBERT F. BROWN: East 55th, mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Three Forty-Four East 55th. And I was having trouble with this image, because the buildings seemed to be sliding down—well, the sliver of blue sky above it—and I wanted the building to, obviously, stay put. But it visually seemed to be sliding off the canvas. And the way to anchor it was to do exactly what Hopper did in *Early Sunday Morning*: it's that square suggestion [00:18:00] of a building behind the main subject. And it worked, so—I literally lifted that right from a Hopper painting—[inaudible].

ROBERT F. BROWN: But this is details. This is the upper parts of the uppermost windows, and then the cornice above.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: That's right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Uh, it's almost abstract

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: It is almost abstract. Yeah, I didn't mention that another artist who was—who excited me at that time in those early museum-going years was Mondrian. And especially *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, which I found to be perfectly titled for a 12-year-old, because to me it said everything that was—obviously, it was more the—than about that, but the title was intriguing, because it looked—the painting looks like a map, like an aerial view of the city maps. That takes care of the Broadway part, and those little squares almost look like traffic—[inaudible]. And the "boogie-woogie" was the rhythm coming through from all that. Mondrian-like boogie-woogie. He liked jazz piano. I like to think he would probably have enjoyed Philip Glass, too. It almost seems like a visual—the painting seems like a visual interpretation of that music.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative]. These were done for yourself. Or did you show them to anybody?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: These were done for myself. I'd show them, and my brother-in-law ended up with this one. I gave them to my sister and my brother-in-law as a wedding gift. And this one we kept. *Nedick's* I still don't have a picture of, but it was, uh, the one that was half-finished when—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, when you went—right.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —I transferred out to LA. And you could see the Pop influence here. This is a dollar bill. I was just kind of taking any and all subjects. If it looked interesting, semi-interesting, I would paint it. I did a sink.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Is the dollar bill larger than life-size?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: It's larger, yes. Yes, that is around here. I still have that one.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And these—[clears throat] was this an attempt at honing your ability to control the medium? I mean, they're very precise in some—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yeah, well, it wasn't so much controlling, because I found out I could do that on the first one. It was, I suppose, somewhat controlling, because you're always [00:20:00] dealing with that, but what it was more as trying to decide how exactly I wanted to paint. I wasn't sure how loose or how tight I should do this.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Because you knew you had the ability to do precision, of course, because you were training since a young man.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yeah. If anything, I could do that too well, and I was trying to loosen up a little and see what else I could do.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, pull away from that. And yet it was just the time of, say, of Pop art, which you say you first saw in '62 at Janis. Uh, things were changing, though, from year to year, as I recall—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —during those years. Weren't there new—?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yes, they were. They also—and I've heard this is true of a lot of realist painters at the time—uh, it opened the doors to realist painting again, in a sense, because it took—it began to be a shift away from a photo—I mean, the Abstract Expressionists' way of doing things.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, it was a painting called Southland [ph] Hotel, which was a hotel outside the building where I worked in Los Angeles. When I got to Y&R in LA, there was this thing called Southland Hotel across the street, a big pink or salmon-colored building. It looked very Hopper-ish in its demeanor. I did that. I photographed it, I made some—just using a polaroid black-and-white camera, I made some sketches of it, and did that. So, there was still this strong Hopper influence at that point.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The use of the camera, the polaroid, that was simply reference—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Reference.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —so you'd say, now, what was that detail like that captivated me [ph]?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Exactly, exactly, right. Pretty crude photography, but it was enough to tell me what was going on.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And your sketches would be of what sort?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Black-and-white quick sketches with lots of notes about what was happening where.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Okay.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: And eventually, not too long after that, I did that with a couple of other subjects. And then I thought, well—the camera really is sort of my high-speed sketchbook. And the only way I'm going to get all these subjects to work from is to just photograph as much as I could. Anything that intrigued me I would try to get on film, so I had some reference material. And I built that up, staying with black-and-white, for a long while [00:22:00] before I finally went to color. I felt in the early years—I felt that if I used color I was somehow cheating, and I shouldn't know what color it was. But that was no longer a problem for me. It's going to become my color and my palette anyway, very quickly.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And it didn't bother you that you were using photographs to any degree whatsoever? Because some—as I recall, some purists, at least at that time, a generation or two ago, were saying, "Oh, there musn't be any use of—"

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: I know. I know. It's been going on for years. There are artists that have taken that secret to the grave with them, but there were a lot of people using photography as a reference.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you were perfectly used to, from your earlier days, translating something observed and recorded very precisely.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: I was. Definitely, I was. I had no intention of ever painting something that looked photographic. No matter how tight it was, it had something else going on. Uh, I did—just there is a picture of luggage. There was these phonebooths at night. Um, *Thrifty Drug* was the largest—this is a five by—a six-foot painting. Uh, it's one of the few times that the human figure actually appears in my work. And in this case, it was there strictly for scale, to give a sense of how large the sign was. But I found that—

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.] Yes, it's immense, yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —it became a narrative device. It began—you began to question why that person was there, and certainly wasn't what the painting was about. So, I—it just seemed like a time to eliminate, make that conscious decision to eliminate the figure, because I had more to say, and I felt that this—that the subject had more to say than paintings of people.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now, what does something, a rather huge, overpowering sign like this, a rather vernacular billboard sign of the Thrifty Drug—what does it say? Or what were you trying to make it say?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, I was just interested in the—its place in the environment, and as a part of our American culture. I think a lot of this came from my exposure to Europe, and being in Paris, and on returning, I realized how unique an environment we had. It was very different [00:24:00] from anything I'd seen over there. Sure, they have signs, but everything is just so much more genteel, and so much more—

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —subdued, that this is—I wanted to capture something with brashness, and some of the vitality, especially, of American cities. And so, I found myself—without realizing it, I was moving into that area, by doing what I thought was first more architectural, these buildings, and the windows, and brownstones, the Southland Hotel. Uh, the signs began to creep in as a part of this environment, and suddenly I found that that was more of interest to me than the architectural part. It was the construction of these signs, and the mix of materials that was being used, the glass and the chrome, the fabric for awnings, neon tubes, steel. It was chain, all kinds of brackets, and all this hardware, assembled to sell you something, or to just name the place.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. About when was this? What's the—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: This was '65.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So here's—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Oh, here's another one of Thrifty Mart. This one was Thrifty, which was the drug store, and the other was Thrifty Mart.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Thrifty Mart. [Laughs.]

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: It just happened, but this was around the corner from where I lived in Los Angeles. I lived in an apartment called—the address was 123. Uh, 1234, Hayworth.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hmm. Excuse me. Yeah, right. So, the, um—you were doing these just as you had time, when you were with Young & Rubicam. I mean you must've been pretty darn busy as an art director.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: I was—that's absolutely right. I was working hard at the agency, but I would sometimes, if things were slow, I would leave early in the afternoon and get back to my apartment—I would just disappear, and work at home. I worked most every night. I was—I even learned to sleep in the chair. I would work until, say, around midnight, and then sleep for 10 or 15 minutes, sitting up, and then wake up and work for another couple of hours, go to sleep at 2:00 or 3:00. Um, I don't know how I did it now that I look back, but it really was the way that I got [00:26:00] enough work together to have my first show, although I wasn't even aiming for that at the time. All I wanted to do was paint, and see what I could do, and just keep growing. And things happened fast. Things changed and grew very quickly in the first year or two. So, once I began to see that I had work, and I had slides to show, then it began to occur to me that maybe there's a show here. Well, actually, the very early things never got to the show, because I had progressed to a point where I wouldn't even show those.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And we're still—what we're looking at now are rather early ones, is that right?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: These are from the very first show, yes. And this was what—actually the image we used on the folder. I don't have any—[inaudible]—but there was a folder that the [inaudible].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative], with this *Thrifty Mart*.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: *Thrifty Mart*, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. And how do you compare that with some of your very early things? This is sort of the whole flank of a building.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yes. Well, it's more ambitious, in the sense that it's a larger painting. It's more frontal, where some of these other things like the telephone booth was in perspective from the corner, and at night, more dramatic.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You're carrying the element of abstraction a bit further here.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: I think I am, yes. Another thing I was watching at this time was the Bay Area. There were certain clusters of artists working over my life up to that point that were really inspiring me, that were getting me thinking about certain ways of dealing with imagery, and painting in general. The first was that whole museum-going time, when I was—I mean, the first exposure to museum shows, and that was the Hopper, the Mondrian, and there was the Charles Demuth, and Dickinson, and Marsden Hartley. But that was the first go-around. And then there was the Pop art show at Janis, and that was—that opened a whole other area for me. And then finally here in Los Angeles, I was looking more to the Bay Area and the people up there: Diebenkorn, and David Park, and Elmer Bischoff, Paul Wonner, Wayne Thiebaud. [00:28:00] They were doing things in a more painterly way. They were taking the Abstract Expressionist techniques and, and using—putting paint on, but applying it, lo and behold, back to realistic subject matter. That's—I liked that. So I, I did a couple of special—specially painted works. One was called *Luggage*, and one was called *Parking Lot*, that I experimented with that application of paint, what I thought was being loose, very loose for me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: They were specially painted in the sense that you were trying them out. I mean, you were trying out this painterly—



ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Right, I chose those subjects because they allowed me to do what I thought I wanted to try out, but—and it did; it worked. But at that point I realized, well, I feel like I'm a little further out—and this is always the problem, I think other artists have the same thing—when you experiment, and you push beyond what your normal boundaries are, you find yourself out in a place that can be very exciting, but you also question whether you belong there. Have you pushed yourself too far? Is this not really your area? Should you withdraw slightly? And I did. I actually pulled back slightly from that really overly painterly kind of approach, and just put a little more control back into it. For better or worse.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And this would've been about when, toward the end of the '60s, or—?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: That would've been—yeah, that was the mid-'60s, really. It was around '67–'65 and '66, yes, those three years, for the most part. Then I began to think in terms of series, where I found—if I found a subject, or I had an idea for a type of imagery, one painting wouldn't necessarily tell me all I needed to know about it. There is a lot of self-discovery in all this, too, I've learned. So, a series seemed to be an efficient and an interesting way to [00:30:00] develop and to explore an area. So that would mean something like five paintings, or six paintings normally. I don't think I went beyond that, in terms of canvases, except—well, that's—until I started doing—doing what I call façades, the main sign paintings, that I've done for 30 years. That became a very long series.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And each one, you were working at it differently? Or did you—would you say—did you consciously embark on a series? Or it just happened that way?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yes, I did.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You did.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: No, I intentionally embarked. This was a house I did, a one-shop house in a circle, which was a house on Bunker Hill, a section of Los Angeles downtown.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sort of a late Victorian house.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yes, where they have pretty good-sized houses. They were mansions, some of them. And they were razing that whole area. They were gonna put up a city center with new buildings. So they took all that down, but before they did, I took a few photographs of several of them, and I did this painting of one with a black circle around it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And then you would do something like that, but then different?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: No, this was just sort of—

ROBERT F. BROWN: That was a one-shot.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —this suggested the subject to me. It was a one-shot. And I didn't even—it took me about a year or two to figure out why I did this, and I had obviously made a target, but it was very unconscious at the time. I was upset that they were tearing these things down, and this house became the bullseye. But I promise you, it was not in my conscious mind at the point when I was painting that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: This is where I saw how—it's a painting of Pix—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Pix moviehouse—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Moviehouse on Hollywood Boulevard. And I learned how far I was going from one year to the next, in terms of my painting expertise. This is, in a way, a sad story. I had done this painting, and I sold it to a collector, through Molly Barnes' gallery. One of the things that was happening was that the paint was peeling, because I had used—for the white [00:32:00] background I had used some house paint, and it wasn't holding up along with the rest of the oils. And he asked if I could restore it. So, I said I would. And I kept putting him off, but finally I got the painting back to the studio, and I redid it. I had it in there for months in the studio, while I was—slowly removed all this house paint, repainted, all that, got it together. And I'd had it so long, and I'd put him off earlier for so long, that I just—all I wanted to do was get it back, and he was being very, very patient with me, and I didn't want to push it. So, I—the one day I'd planned to bring it back, I borrowed a Volkswagen bus from a friend, and I was going to tie it on top of the bus. It was a windy day. It was a very windy day, blustery. But, as I said, I didn't want to put it off, so I tied the painting up there—

ROBERT F. BROWN: It's quite a big painting.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: It's a big painting, six feet. Yeah, it was 6 feet 9 inches. And I was crossing over the freeway, the Hollywood Freeway, at one point, on one of the overpasses, and that's all I needed to do, because the updraft just tore the painting right off the top of the—it sounded like an explosion, an explosion behind me. I just—I looked around, and I saw this thing leaving the car in shreds. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Wow.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: It was splintered wood all over the middle of the street from the stretcher frame, and the canvas tore in a lot of places, but still some of it intact. I was standing there, and I remember a car with two women in it just gradually slowed. First, they slowed down, and then they slipped around very quietly, to get—stay out of my way and get past me. And as they went by, I heard one woman go [makes *tsk, tsk, tsk* sound].

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: That's all I heard. I can still hear it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So, you were pretty devastated.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: I scooped it up, I put it in the van, found the nearest phone booth, and called Tony, the collector, and said that "I've got some bad news for you." And he was amazingly kind. He said, "Don't worry—I'll just take another painting. Can you replace it with something else?" And I said, "No, I'm going to get you this painting. I'm gonna do another painting for you. I'm going to redo the whole painting." [00:34:00] And I did. I did another painting in that size, and it was—[laughs]—immensely better than the one that was destroyed. And that was one year. So, I thought, that was a lesson. I had come that far. And someone said to me, another friend, he said, "Look, the middle part isn't so bad. It didn't get too damaged." And there was this whole section that centered right on the name Pix. So, I took that part. I saved that center cut, and I re-stretched that on a smaller stretcher frame, and I titled it *Pix Remains*, and some friends of mine—I told them the whole story, and they bought that. So that little bit of it still remains.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This also leads to the larger-scale graphics that you—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: That's true, that's true, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —later see in your work. Well, was—at this time, in Los Angeles, was Molly Barnes a reasonably prominent place? You've mentioned the Ferus Gallery. Was that the leading one, or was there a hierarchy, really?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yes. Yeah, there was certainly—there was—I don't know if it was what you'd call it a hierarchy. It was a small art scene. Most of them were centered on La Cienega Boulevard. Uh, there was Molly, who was one of the newer ones at that point, Ferus Gallery, which was—with a touch of New York there; they had a very clean, a very East Coast look, and it was—that was an exciting place.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What would you—what—excuse me—what would you have meant then by an East Coast look?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, it was very minimal. Uh, white walls, just an empty—pure, empty space.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Whereas the local vernacular would've been—gallery would've appear—in Los Angeles—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Might've had, oh, I don't know, textured, say, textile on the wall, possibly, or a little more décor going for it. Not all, but I mean—Ferus was the extreme version of—and Molly, I must say, had that kind of look, too. So that was creeping in. It was very smart, and it worked well with Pop art. Pop art was also a very big force at that time on the West Coast, as well, obviously. It was a national movement, so it would be. Um, [00:36:00] there was—Herbert Palmer was another one that had a gallery that was viable and showing some smart things. Um, there was—what was it called? There was one in the Valley. Uh, I can't think of the name, but they were sort of out of the loop.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. And they say that the whole art community at that time was still quite small.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yeah, it was small. Orlando Gallery, I think that's what it was called.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Orlando, in the—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Orlando Gallery, yeah, Ventura Boulevard. And then it was Nick Wilder, and Ralph Nelson was another one. So these were all the places that I would've been jumping out of that Triumph with my slides, and talking to people—

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —and I had interest, but the one that finally went for it in a big way was Molly, so we just hopped right on [ph].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now, who were the—would you say the patrons were at that time? Or was there a fairly small group within that large city?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: There was a small group. Um—yes. In fact—[laughs]—the only name

that leaps to mind is Sterling Holloway, who was known because he was such an avid contemporary art collector. Uh, where in New York you might've had 20 people in that caliber, this was the one that everybody knew about, and when you spotted him at an opening, everybody—you could see the circle of people around him. [They laugh.] Very interested in Sterling.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you get friendly in these years with various of the artists and dealers, to any degree?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Not a whole lot of the West Coast artists. No, it's funny: they were very cliquish in some ways. I met some of them. I met Billy Al Bengston, and I was friends with Tony DeLap, and we had family gatherings together. Jack Glen was the dealer that came out and opened probably the smartest gallery of all, for the short time he was out there, down in Corona Del Mar, removed from the whole LA scene, but a very special place. Very New York-connected, though, too. So that's one of the reasons it looked so smart. It was an interesting scene.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did it matter to them the approval of the East Coast at that time? [00:38:00] Or were they pretty much self-sufficient?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: The West Coast artists?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Artists and the—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Oh, I think they were very much unto themselves. I think they didn't—I suppose it would've been exciting to be connected with New York, but at that time, they all seemed very, very into the West Coast look, the fetish finish, as it was called, kind of thing, with people like John McCracken, doing those minimal fiberglass planks, which I've always thought were very, very beautiful, and simple, and a bold thing to do. Uh, Craig Kauffman, Larry Bell. Who else?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did many of them, like you, make their living, so to speak, elsewhere, as you did? You continued throughout this period with the—at the ad agency, did you? For most of the time.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh—most of—the beginning period, when I was developing all these early paintings. It was four and a half years I was with them, with the agency, until it was time to quit. It was just time for me to get out and do what I wanted to do.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And by then, were you married? Or had a family, or—?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, just. We—

ROBERT F. BROWN: So it was a bold gesture, then, to strike out—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: It was. I was surprised at myself, actually, for doing it. But it just seemed—and it was actually a very naïve thing to do. When I quit, we had just gotten married. I can still remember the expression on my wife's parents' face when I—

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —faces when I told them. I don't think we were married six months. And I said I was leaving my advertising job. My day job. [They laugh.] Uh, but I just felt that I could do this. I'd—at that point, I had that first show at Molly's. But what I didn't think about really was how little those paintings sold for, and how impossible it would've been for us to survive on that. I just went

ahead and did it. And what happened, without any plan—I could never have planned it—was, first, the agency called me almost immediately, the next day, or the second day out, and asked [00:40:00] if I could help them on a freelance basis, because they were in a jam, and they needed some layouts. Well, then—that was a piece of cake. I could take that work, and bring it to my studio, do the whole—what would've taken me a day in the agency to do, with lost time, wasted time in meetings and so forth, I could do in an hour or two, and paint the rest of the day. I also got a teaching job. They called me from the Art Center, College of Design, and would I help out over there. I taught two mornings a week for a couple of years.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you like teaching?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: No.

ROBERT F. BROWN: No.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Not really. I had never really—I never looked for that, or made a habit of it in any way. I've done my visiting artist stints here and there, which are kind of fun—you go somewhere for two or three days—but that's about it. But what happened was, I never looked for work—[inaudible]—painter. I never went out to solicit jobs from anybody. But I also never said no if they called me. And that took exactly three years. That was a three-way segue, where the paintings had a chance to appreciate, and sell for higher and higher prices. And it took three years for the business to die, if you don't maintain it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Sure, I did the work I was given, but I never went out and added to it. And at the end of three years, it was a very comfortable position I was in. I was able to live off the paintings, and not have to—now, I could never have planned that. I could never have worked that out on paper. And it's why I always tell students, you have to do these things. You just have to stick your neck out and take a chance, because you have no idea what's going to happen, and usually something good will happen.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So this was by the early '70s, then. Was that the end of the three years?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: That would've been—yes. That would've been—yeah, that's right. It was '68 when it—when I quit, and by '70 and '71—by '71 I was already connected with—had my first show at Ivan Karp, OK Harris in New York, and things really were on track.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now your wife, was her background—what was that? Can you—?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: She was a writer. She worked at Young & Rubicam, first in the art department, not as an artist, but just a—[00:42:00] for the art—what they called the art buyers. They were people that would—that called in the suppliers, the art suppliers, photographers and illustrators. And she worked for them, and then she became a writer. She put a portfolio together, and started writing. She worked for Ogilvie in New York, and then she came out to Los Angeles and did some small agencies there, and worked for Young & Rubicam. And while I was out there painting, somebody sent me a book from New York—not a book but the magazine, *New York Magazine*, with Richard Estes on the cover, and a whole story about what was going on in New York in terms of realist painting. And I was just amazed that—because we were all doing it on the West Coast. We all—I mean, I was doing it in Los Angeles, and there was Bechtle and McLean and Goings doing it up in the Bay Area. But this is the first indication I had that something was

happening nationally, that there was a look, and a type of painting going on that had to do with urban landscape. And it was ultimately called photorealism. In fact, Richard had done paintings with the same titles as paintings that I had done. He had a Pix, but his Pix was 42nd Street—

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —Times Square, and my Pix was Hollywood Boulevard. He had one called *Telephone Booth*, and I had a couple of telephone booths. Uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you ever—I suppose you did—ever just talk with him, or others in New York, how this parallel evolution occurred? Or—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: No, we—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —did you have the same intentions, maybe, or—?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: I think so. Certain intentions would have been similar. We all met and know each other now. I'm just trying to remember some of the other paintings that were so similar. But it was a shock, but also gratifying to know that something was happening, and I was kind of there. I was sort of in the middle of this thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: There's the painting of the parking lot.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is a painting of a parking lot. [00:44:00] Now what—about, what—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: This is the one where—it's taken with a telephoto lens, so it's very compressed. And it was the one that I used to do what I was considering to be very loosely-applied, almost Expressionist painting. You can see how un-loose it is—from this, but—at that time, for me, it was a lesson in how to loosen up, and how to try to get out of old habits.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Also the reference to—there's hardly a complete object in there. It's all parts and overlaps and the like, isn't it? It's a—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yeah, it's a very abstract image.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. Was this shown? Was this one—?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: This was shown. Yes, this was shown at Molly's. Uh, but we still actually haven't gotten into any series yet. It was just about this point I started to think—when I dealt with the automobiles and parking lots, I began to see things around me in a different way, in terms of freeways and vehicles that I was seeing just driving, on daily drives. So, I initiated this series of oil trucks, tank trucks. And there were five of those. I couldn't very well photograph these things when I was driving, because it would've been dangerous.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: So I went—for a source, I went to trade publications, things like—things —magazines called *Petroleum Weekly*, and things like that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: So I—they would have photographs of these, and in a lot of cases, they would be generic. For instance, in the Shell truck, this was a—there's a story that goes with this where this appeared in the magazine as a generic silver truck. It was a metallic, shiny surface with absolutely no corporate identification at all. But I wanted to give it that—

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This is tape two of two side A.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you gave it your own pertinence—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Oh, yeah. I added identifying marks onto this—onto a truck that had no identity. Um, so that's [inaudible]—

ROBERT F. BROWN: These are great looming presences. They all embody strength, and I suppose there was a bit of a machoism to the ads that you saw. Right? They were trying to convince people to buy this and that.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Well, yeah, maybe so, but—I suppose, because of the attitude that the truck has, but I tried to explore that, enhance that, and bring it to the fore. Uh, and you could see that in the cropping. There was an Army truck here, which a friend of mine—I said I wanted these to have a slightly menacing—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, menacing's a good word.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —ominous quality. And a friend of mine saw this orange one. He said, "Yeah, this one looks like it, just did something bad, and it's leaving."

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, but the Shell truck had a presence to it now, and it was—for me, it was truly a Shell truck. But I had no sooner finished it, I had it in this back—the bedroom of this apartment house that I had in Los Angeles, and I was moving. I found another space, a larger—upstairs, a Victorian house where I could spread out, have more of a studio. So I was moving, and I couldn't handle this stuff myself, so I hired a small, one-man moving company. He came in his truck, and when it came time to clear out the studio, he comes into the room, and he sees this Shell truck on an easel, and he stops. He stares at it for a second, and he says, "Shell doesn't use Chevys." [They laugh.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: He knew it.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: He knew his trucks. Who would have thought that I had it that wrong?

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.] How large are these? Pretty good size paintings?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yeah, these are about six feet.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah? That's—what was the reaction to them? Were these shown fairly soon?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yeah, these were shown, I think, in the second show at Molly's, and it was—it made for a good show. [00:02:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Around 19—late '60s. '69 or so, yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: That would be '69, yeah. Along with some of these other things, I did a series called "Towers," which were the Art Deco, which I've had this affinity for, for years. I mean, and Los Angeles is a motherlode of Art Deco architecture, so—the Pan-Pacific was a prime example of that, and I learned since then that the person that designed it—I don't know his name, but the person that designed Pan-Pacific Auditorium also designed the Cord automobile. You remember that beast they called the coffin nose?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh yes, it had—yeah, it had these great horizontal fins in the front, yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Had superchargers coming out of this. It was coils, yeah. Anyway, same person. And the May Company was also a great example of that, on Wiltshire and Fairfax.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And what do you think it is in Art Deco, the streamline quality, that appeals to you?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yes, I think there's something about my growing up with it. It had been around for years before I came along, but it was still there. It was very prevalent. And also, it's the World's Fair. But—and also, in '45—it referred very strongly, I think, now, to the World's Fair experience.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The World's Fair, sure, which was a classic Art Deco—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: And this is of that exact period as the Pan-Pacific.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Los Angeles was filled with these rather excess decoration, but appealing, in some ways.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: That was the big—the early thriving Hollywood days, of the '30s, and '40s. There was Ralph's supermarket, and the El Rey Theatre on Wilshire. And the two Ralphs. Um, but there was this other series, and there were five of those.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And what did you—I was gonna ask you, be—maybe getting into oil trucks, but let's take this—what do you think, as you look back, did you learn, or not learn, or improve, or what, in the course of doing one of these series?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, I just—I learned—let's see. It's hard to say what I learned. I was learning to paint. I was becoming a little more familiar with color with each painting.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Although still tentative, because I was putting most of them against [00:04:00] a white background. I was silhouetting the main shape against white. So, I was being very cautious about my colors.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Your color wasn't a big factor at that point.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Not at that point. But I wanted to achieve this monolithic quality, a strong presence of a particular type of structure. Um, I found out, I think, there's—to answer that question, there's a point when I did learn a lot, and I had to do a commission that I received, right along this period.



ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: After I—I next did a series of houses. Actually did a few with a real blue sky behind them, but then reverted to the white silhouetted look again in a lot [ph] of those.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And were these picked for any particular reason, do you think, this tied—? There was a variety of houses, uh—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: This was—these were houses that I found that, they were individual. There was no two alike. Uh, so this was a very special time—[laughs]—when houses were built one at a time, with unique designs. But also, there were Hollywood houses. They were almost bungalows. They were these smaller family homes, which I found to be almost surreal in their—in the way they sat on the plot they sat on, and also the feeling where there was usually no one around. I'd be driving up and down the streets, and there never seemed to be anybody that lived there. The houses were true façades, and I painted them that way.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: They almost look like flats.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes, they do. And divorced from any larger environment.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yes. But there's a mystery to these, I feel.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: I hate to use words to describe them, because it's what I paint them. There's something that comes through from this—and I think, again, it's that early Sunday morning Hopper view, too, that you—

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you would say it comes through as painting, not as—because it's such-and-such a house, with such-and-such a shape.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Right. It's all—

ROBERT F. BROWN: It's the painting that comes through.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: It's the—it's all of that, but it's a new entity. It's a new—it's a new object [00:06:00] that I've created. Once I had done five houses, I actually did a sixth house, which I destroyed. I was just—I didn't have the heart for the sixth one. I was—I had worked the idea out. There was no reason to go further. And I did this pool, which I thought might also be a series, although it wasn't. I thought that one was enough, and I wanted to get away from that. I was, at this point, in a—having a little crisis, because I didn't know what I wanted to paint next. I wanted a body of work, I wanted a work—I wanted something that I could get into in a big way, some subject, and I wasn't finding it, when a friend of ours came to us, came to me, and said would I do a commission for her to give to her husband as a gift. Um, he was a film director. And there was one image that he would doodle all the time. For years, he had been doing this doodle, that it was the Twentieth Century Fox logo.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, would I do a painting of that? Well, I did. I said—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Wow—[inaudible].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —"All you need to do is get me some, uh"—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sorry. Twentieth Century Fox Painting. This is when we're getting into around '70, '71, something?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: This would've been, um—I could tell you. This was '69.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you had him get for you—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: It was—yeah, she—I said, "If you would just get me a source, something I can refer to for this, then I'll happily do it." And she got a film strip from someone at Twentieth, and I did this painting, which was about four by five feet. But this is where the lesson came in. This is how—by doing this, I began to see all the things that I wasn't doing, and all the opportunities I wasn't taking advantage of when I was doing my own work. Um, I didn't do much with this Twentieth Century Fox logo. I didn't change it much. It's basically a painting of that, without any of my comment about it. But [00:08:00] it was a big lesson for me, because—first of all, I saw the richness of color that was possible, that I was avoiding. I was sidestepping that issue, honestly, up to this point. Uh, there was the overall composition, where things don't have to be silhouetted against a white background. They can fill the canvas. Um, they can reach out and incorporate the edges of that canvas as part of the composition. The whole thing becomes one composition, instead of an arbitrary frame around one particular shape. Um, the complexity of the image. The fact that I have these interlocking shapes, diagonal thrust, all the formal devices, in other words. And, uh, above and beyond that was the illusion of the third dimension, which is something that, in 20th-century art, is something that's been discarded, and we're supposed to be—it's a two-dimensional surface, it should be a two-dimensional—[laughs]—subject, so—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative], yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Um, there is a joy in reading a third dimension on a two-dimensional plane. So all of these things came into play, and I realized that I had to move along with this. I was—I had been told something by doing this painting, and I had to follow what I was told. So, I had an image in my head of—and this was a big conceptual shift for me, and it's hard to explain, but I—up to this point, I was looking for subjects, individual subjects that may have become series, or may have been individual paintings. But I was still searching out by actually driving and traveling throughout Los Angeles with an eye to that. What could I paint? What is paintable? What is something that is—that means something to me, that actually has—gives me a feeling, something I want to convey? At this point, I had some—a whole different approach. I realized that I had in my mind's eye a series of paintings [00:10:00] that had this kind of complexity. I could see them. I could see the abstract qualities in them. I could see the color. They even formed themselves as squares in my mind. I knew they would be square. But I didn't know what the subject was. Uh, I knew that, also, that I wasn't going to make abstract paintings to achieve that end result, because I couldn't do it. It's just not my makeup. I—the idea of facing a blank canvas and inventing shapes is just not me. I've tried it. I know it doesn't work. It never would. But I had a hunch that if I went downtown—to LA, downtown—and photographed some of the denser streets of the—denser commercial streets—and the prime street down there was Broadway—that I might find what I'm looking for. That's exactly what happened. I found the signs—things that happen above eye level. I was using a Hasselblad camera at that point anyway. I know now that's where the square came from. The square viewfinder was beginning to impose itself on my vision. I remember getting the first roll of film processed. And I opened the box, I looked at the slide, and I said, "I got it. It's here. I know I've got

what I need now." And I knew it was a series, to begin with, of at least five or six paintings, but I had no idea it would be a series for 30 years. It just keeps going, and it's still going, even though I've taken on other work, and other series, other images. I still revert and do an occasional square façade painting. But that was very fortunate. I was very pleased I found that, and it was a breakthrough, that show. That was the third show at Molly's, and it was leaps and bounds beyond anything that we had previously at the shows.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Leaps and bounds means stronger, more memorable, vivid?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Stronger—stronger in every way. It—more committed. There was a direction that was clear, and a—[00:12:00] Uh, I keep wanting to say "commitment"; there must be a better word than that, but it was—everything I had, everything I knew up to that point, went into these, and it showed. And yet there was a consistency. There wasn't one that was different—you know, was, say, much stronger than any other one. They all had—there was a democracy to it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: But even that was part of it. They all became a part of this main street of Broadway. Um, it got a lot of attention. It got some nice columns and nice articles written about it. And that was the first six. I immediately did another few, and those became 10, the next 10, and also the ones that were shown in my first New York show at OK Harris.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you were zeroing in, much closer, yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Right, I was starting to close in on these things. And that's continued, I think. The ones today are even closer and tighter than the ones I was doing at that time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Well that's—does that consistency—did it ever bother you? Did you think, hey, shouldn't I be stepping back, or deliberately shutting this down and doing something else? I suppose you have had times when you've moved away from it to a slight degree, or temporarily.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, yes, yes, and I even changed the scale. Occasionally I would do a smaller—at the time I didn't believe I could do them any size but the size that I started. They were six and a half feet exactly, square. I think that probably had something to do with arm span, and the idea that these paintings could push you back, as well as invite you in, and they were that large, just large enough to not be overwhelming, but large to be dealt with. Uh, and also, I think a lot of it had to do with the size of the signs themselves. They came close to giving that sense of scale. In some cases, the neon looked to me almost in scale. [00:14:00] So I may have been thinking along those lines, too. And then for that reason I didn't think that I could come down in size. I didn't think I could make a 30-inch painting. Later I did, and it was fine, but it took years for me to do that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So by the time you were in Los Angeles, then, until the end of the early '70s, and you—in those last, what, three or so years, you were entirely working as—on—with your paintings. I mean, that was your—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: That was it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —career.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: That's right. And the urban, urban landscape was definitely what I was interested in.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. And you were getting more and more intensely involved into it, I mean, as in the number and letters and these close-up things, yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Right. Uh, and the words began to—I was playing with words, too. It wasn't only the sign, and I rarely show the entire sign. I did in some cases, but there were times when I would crop in and just single out certain letters. *Ode*, there's a painting called *Ode*, O-D-E, which was really a part of Lode's [ph] Jewelers, but I would start to excerpt things from—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: This was called the Broadway series. When we move into the next book, that's where it all starts. Um, this—at that point, we had a one-year-old—no, not even.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: I don't think she was even one year when I started with—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Your little child.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Just six months old, yeah. And so, Jane and I had been planning to take her back east and show her to her grandparents, but I was getting ready for the show at Molly's, this last—the third and last show.

ROBERT F. BROWN: 1970, yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yeah. And I said, "Why don't you—? Listen, I've got so much work here, I really can't take the time to go east, so why don't you just take Reed [ph] and you go back and have some fun?" And I said, "While you're there—[laughs]—take some slides, just in case you go into the city, and talk to some galleries." So [00:16:00] she did that, and she spoke to a lot of people uptown. She stayed around 57th Street. And she said everybody was saying, "You should go to this person downtown. There's gallery called OK Harris." It's—Ivan Karp was the dealer. Um, and she almost didn't do it. She almost thought, well, that's way downtown, and it was—at that point, there were only two galleries down there: there was Paula Cooper and Ivan. Which—at the end of the day, she did. She took a taxi down there, and she said she walked in, and she saw somebody outside sweeping the sidewalk. And she went inside, and Patterson Sims was sitting—

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, you know Patterson? He was at the desk, and she said he had a red and white bandana on. Well, this is, uh—this is the '60s, late '60s at that point. But he was very, very accommodating, very accessible. He looked at the slides, and said, "Oh, Ivan should see this." Ivan came in from outside. It was him; it was Ivan that was sweeping the sidewalk. [They laugh.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: He was sweeping, Ivan.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: And Ivan's got a cigar, and looking at the slides, and he says—at first, they kept thinking it was Jane, that she was the artist, and she was trying to make it clear, "No, no, this is not my work, it's my husband's work." And then Ivan was saying things like "We're going to make your boy famous." [They laugh.] It's like I was a boxer or something. So that was an experience—she always talks about that. She loved that whole story.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And then within the year—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Well then, yeah, within a year I had a show there. But it happened in a funny way, where—I'm not sure I can get this whole thing, the whole sequence right now, but, at that point, Jack Glenn—that's right—he said to her, "There's a gallery opening out there in Corona Del Mar. It's Jack Glenn Gallery, and you should go see him." Because he was a collector in the—worked with Ivan, collector and dealer. Uh, so, we did, we—and that same day, I think the day she called me—I know what it was: she called me and told me about this gallery, and I said, "Wait a minute," I said, "I just threw away a *Life* Magazine with some article in it, and it was one about Ivan, his opening in SoHo," and I still have it around here someplace. [00:18:00] But it was all sort of coming together. We then got to go to Jack Glenn's gallery. I think Ivan told him about us, and they sent us an invitation, and we went down and met him, and his wife Connie. And through that—then Ivan came out. We met. I got to meet him at the gallery in California. But he wouldn't come up—he didn't come up to see the paintings. He wasn't going to come up to LA. He didn't have time. But shortly after that, he sent one of his big collectors to see me, somebody whose eye he trusted, a guy named Al Ordover.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Ordover.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yeah. And I had two big paintings completed at that point, and the timing was just right. And Al came by, saw the paintings, and gave me a stamp of approval, called Ivan, said, "The boy's okay." [They laugh.] Anyway, that's how it started. And we planned—then we went to the—back to the city. Um—we were back east together, had a meeting with Ivan, and it was done. A very nice time for my life, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So it happened very—pretty quickly, then.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yeah. It did. Yeah, very quickly. Within a year, I had—I don't know how that happened, actually. He must've made some room for me, because I know he had a lot of artists he was handling. So, I'm not sure how that went down.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And did you send—? It was a great thing to at least have a toehold in New York.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Oh, sure—well, that was just verification, I suppose.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sure.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Told me I was on—I was doing something that was right, and I sure felt good about it, and I was happy that someone else did. It could've easily been that I would remain in LA, and be an LA artist and painter, and that would've worked out, too, I suppose, but New York is a better place to be, in terms of this world, art world.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: That was headquarters.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you fairly, uh, shortly thereafter, decided—moved, actually moved away from Los Angeles?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: At that point, we were living—[00:20:00] in fact, I think the reason we were in New York was we were getting ready to move to London.

ROBERT F. BROWN: To London?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: We just about had—yeah, we had had it with LA, and we thought it was time to—it was eight years.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: And it was time to change our lifestyle in some way. We wanted a different place.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was it that you were getting tired of, or bored with, or what?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: It was just, just the same. Every day was the same, I mean, in terms of the weather, and nothing seemed to be building, or going anywhere. And I just didn't want to grow old and die there. I felt like we oughta see some more of the world, we oughta experience more, especially—and we've got two little girls at this point now—that's right, this is a little later. There's two girls, and they were preschool, so if we were going to do anything disruptive, this was the time to do it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: And so we made a pact, and we shook hands on the beach. We were out at the beach one day, and we just—we shook hands on it, that we would make a move. And we narrowed it down very quickly that there was no sense going up to San Francisco. We liked big cities. That was established right off the bat. It would be another city somewhere, but San Francisco, although it would be the easiest, it wasn't enough. And we wouldn't even have to change license plates, so that's not much of an adventure. Uh, so we figured Europe. And New York—we're from New York. We can always go back there, so what else can we do? We'll go to Europe. Where in Europe? Well, we don't speak any of the languages, so let's narrow it down to London. We didn't want to deal with French hospitals if we had any problems with the kids. And so, that was it. It was that simple. People—I've had to answer this question so many times: "What made you go to London? Why would you go there?" It was a time to do something adventurous, but not so adventurous that we were complete foreigners. So at least we could speak English and get by.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: And London was a good place to do that. So, we ended up living there for four years, and we even bought a house there. We sold a house—we had bought a house in Los Angeles in the Hollywood Hills. We lived in that for, I think, about two and a half years, and we sold that. Sold our cars. Just left it. Just got rid of everything, basically, and moved to London. [00:22:00] Um, four years later, we were back.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was daunting, I guess, but at the same time, uh, pleurably exciting, was it, to leave?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: It was good and bad. There was good and bad about it. Jane was always a little out of commission, because she didn't have—it's hard to explain, but she just didn't have people that could relate to her, exactly who she was. She was American. She wasn't English. She was a different background, just—and with two kids, you need some of that. You need more than she was getting. I had problems with studios. I had seven studios in the four years we were there. It seemed like every time I'd get set up, somebody else had another use for it and I was out again. These were all just rentals. I ended up in—at one point, I was working in the Surrey Docks, which was an hour's Tube ride each way, just home and back, and it's a two-hour subway ride. It worked, it

was a good studio space, but ultimately, they needed that, too. They didn't really need it; they just decided they didn't want me in there anymore, so they just wanted to get—they wanted the space to be empty. There was some long-range plan for this space, I guess, but I could've stayed there. And so, I found another place on Lots Road in Chelsea, and that was better. It was industrial section of—sort of down toward the river. And that was a good spot. I did some good paintings there. But it was a—that was a trial, to go from place to place, and try to maintain my work, to keep the momentum going.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And where, where did you principally live? In Fulham?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: East Fulham, in a place—in a nice little row house that was—it was right about middle—of the row houses that—it was the middle class, classification of row houses, sort of, for the supervisor of the company, rather than the employees, that kind of thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: But we had to do all the plumbing. We had to put everything in ourselves, all the heating. It was a shell, basically, when we got there. [00:24:00] And so we put a lot into it, and of course at that point real estate stopped appreciating. For the four years we were there, it just sort of lay there, and we ended up losing money. We sold it for basically what we paid for it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, it was a time of recession in—yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yeah, it was—everything was stalled at that time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. And what about the art community in London? Did you get involved there at all?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: That was interesting. We—yeah, yeah, we had—the first big show I was in, there was the photorealist show that they had at the Serpentine Gallery in Kensington Gardens. And I met some good people. Sue Grayson was the woman that pulled that whole building together. It was a real boathouse, and she made it into this thriving art gallery that's still going. Uh, and Norbert Lynton was the director of the Hayward Gallery, and got to know him, and some artists: Allen Jones, we were friends with him; and Edwin Pie [ph] was a sculptor; Patrick Caulfield was a great guy, and we were friends. So yeah, we had a nice—it's funny: I have mixed feelings about it. London was a great city. It's a great walking city, and we knew some very interesting people there. Uh, the part—I'll tell you one of the hardest parts about London was the difference in weather between Los Angeles and London was that LA, it was—the sun would shine every day. And because you knew that, you could go into a studio and stay inside all day long and work, because you—I never felt I was really missing anything, because I could always go out tomorrow. The sun was always there for you, most of the time. Of course, there's a bad day or two, but most of the time you could rely on that. Whereas London, when there was a really beautiful day it was impossible for me to work. [They laugh.] Because I always had it in the back of my mind that I was partially on vacation just by being there, and that I shouldn't be doing this to myself, just stay indoors on a gorgeous London day. So of course, I'd be out walking and exploring. I knew London [00:26:00] like the back of my hand for a while there. I'd take Nicholson's guide, and I'd just—I studied all of it—everywhere: East End, the Docks. I knew everything.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did the work continue in series pretty well?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Oh, yes. Oh definitely, yes. It was that one ongoing series, the façades.

That's what kept me going all through that. But never English subjects. I had amassed enough slides, but I kept replenishing that by going back to the States, and taking more photographs of American—because that's one thing that London taught me, was that I was very intense—I was intensely an American painter of American subjects, and of American landscape.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hmm. There was never a particular interest in switching—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Not as subjects. Not as—we have, as you know, we have a house full of English signs.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, yes.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: But they are—that's a collection of antique signs that, for us, give us the flavor of London. I think it's a—I still do that. I love the signs, and I love them—I love the real thing, on our walls. The more the inside of our house looks like the outside of Piccadilly Circus, the happier we are. [They laugh.] But as subjects, I wasn't relating to it. These names were too exotic. They were different. They were strange. Uh, Hovis bread. I didn't know what Hovis—it didn't mean anything to me. I couldn't relate to it. The letter spacing was odd, too much of it, too much space between letters. The style of letter. Even the materials they used, the carved wood with gold leaf in it. Very beautiful, but so not American that I just had no interest in painting it. It would've been gilding the lily to do something, to me, that—some—there's some things where the work is done. The object is the work of art. You can't enhance it, you can't—that's why I don't—I can't imagine—I know there are painters that paint racecars, but to me that racecar is the piece of sculpture. People would send me to Las Vegas, say, "You should go to Las Vegas. They've got great signs out there." Those signs are the works. [00:28:00] There's nothing I can do. I can't transform them into something else.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. Whereas in a great city like Los Angeles or New York, the signs can be garish and big and all, but they're part of a much, much larger—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Right. And you know that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —ambience, I think.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: You can isolate a section that you know kind of what that's about, and has a different message.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. Wow.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, anyway. I can go on—[laughs.]

[Audio break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Okay, you wanted to say a bit more about your time in Los Angeles, or—?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Uh, just that besides painting, we were also becoming very interested in art, and collecting it. And we only bought prints, but it was our way of being on the other side of the art world, as well as just producing the art. And I remember one time, we went to the—one of the big openings for me and for Jane was a Thiebaud opening at the old Pasadena Museum, when it still had that pagoda building. Uh, Jane was knocked out by that. She had never seen anything quite like that, his style of painting. Uh, they had—to go along with the show, they had a lithograph that he had done of candy apples. Just—there was a black and white one, and there was a red one. I mean, one was just black, and one was red. Um, they were \$25 each, and we couldn't decide which



one we wanted. [Laughs.] Had to think. At that time, \$25 and we were newly married, and that was a lot of money for us, so we—okay, we'll take the black one. But I can't get over the fact that we didn't extend ourselves a little to buy the red one, as well. It was just crazy. [They laugh.] Um, but—

ROBERT F. BROWN: And Thiebaud was someone whose work you knew and had admired, is that right?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Yes, yes, I—yes. I still do. I think he's a terrific painter. Um, when we were married, it was December 23rd, 1967, in Los Angeles, and we found out years later—we're very close friends with Chuck and Leslie Close, and it turned out that they were married [00:30:00] the next day. Same year, same—one day off. So every year now, we celebrate our anniversaries together.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh nice. Did you know him before you went west? Or somewhat later, when you came back here?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: No, that was later. There was a time, I remember, some people—when it came to making prints, I hadn't even thought about doing it. And we did one print for, at the time, of documenta 1972. And Sherwood Press wanted to do a portfolio of prints by the photorealist artists that were involved in that show, and so I got to do my first lithograph then of one called *Orph*, an abbreviated "Orpheum" marquee.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And how did you like that experience? I mean—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: I did like that. That was the beginning of a whole other area of art for me. I had never really thought about it, and once I did that, it all stopped again, because there was no one else asking me. I wasn't—in fact, someone came—I met somebody from—well, it was a Hopper show in California, in, I think it was Laguna Beach. And I met someone named Jim Morgan, who had Morgan Gallery in Kansas City. A very nice guy. He's—he died years ago, but he was a terrific guy, and he had a good gallery. And he asked me if I ever do any prints. And I said no. And he said, "Why not?" I said, "Well, no one asked me." Except probably [ph] on the first one.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: He said, "Well, I've got just the guy for you." And he put me in touch with Jack Lemmon of Landfall Press. And they—we have done more collaborations than any other printer over the years.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did—[clears throat] how did you feel, the fact that you do the designing, and much of it—because you have to have a printer also to—or you should—who knows the ins and outs of the technique. Did this bother you?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: If I didn't have a printer, it wouldn't get done, because I can't imagine being a painter and making my own prints [00:32:00] too. It just doesn't—you have to be part engineer and part chemist.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. [Laughs.]

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: It's too much—too many—too much with the materials, and too much can go wrong.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Besides, you were used to collaboration, from your very earliest days in

design places and ad agencies, right?

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: That's true, that's true. I talked about bringing a lot of what I learned in the agencies to my painting, and I think that's one of the aspects. —the idea of dealing with people was something I learned in those days, and not realizing I was learning anything, but you had to go to meetings, you had to defend things, you had to argue why you did it, and explain, be articulate and—I don't know if I'm being that now, but—[laughs]—

ROBERT F. BROWN: No—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —it was something that they—that you learned in the course of working for a company. So, I think a lot of that did come forward. If it didn't, I'd be in big trouble now, being mostly in a studio by myself all day long. I think I would have trouble dealing with the outside world. Uh, it's good to get out, and that's what I like about printmaking. It gets me out of here, and out of this solitary endeavor, and do something—

ROBERT F. BROWN: At the same time, you bring from your past, uh, socialized experience, uh, you bring that here to you're working in isolation, and that's a strength, isn't it? I mean, you have a—you have a momentum—

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: That's right, that's right, and the printmaking comes back here with me, too, because I find that I might have evolved some strategy in terms of a certain—it's all very ineffable. I can't really—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sure.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: —say what that would be, but maybe a color choice, or a sequence of image—of how you lay the image in. But that comes back here. And the next canvas I do might show some of that, more than I even think, but it's there. It's a way of opening things up a little, and changing the ground rules.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, we're going to pick up on that, and I think also—you've been, you were in London, and then you returned here in '76, returned to this country from London, 1976.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: That's right. I came back—I made an initial trip July 4th, [00:34:00] because that was, obviously, the bicentennial. I felt—I sound very chauvinistic when I tell these stories, but I have this love affair with America. It's not that I don't think of myself as being global, as well, and I'm, you know—but I just—I relate to this country. I think the '50s, when I was a teenager, were a very optimistic time. It was some—I was 15 in 1950. So, it just to me, the whole world was my—[laughs]—oyster. I just felt that anything could happen, anything was possible. And I just—it was a good time to be alive.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: And to be working, and to be starting out—[inaudible.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And this was a stunning time to return, then.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: Absolutely. Well, I had to. I had to.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: I was—Jane couldn't do it, she'd—we weren't going to bring the whole family, she said. She really wasn't that interested. I said, "I cannot be in England on the Fourth of July of the bicentennial. I cannot do it." It just seems insane to me now, when I think about it, but that's how strongly I felt about it, and I probably would if it was happening now. So, I flew back for that. At the same time, I said, "Look, I'll reconnoiter, I'll look for houses," because we were getting ready, you know, "see what's available." But the real thrust was to be there. I was on the beach at the Hamptons that day. I remember it very well. I'll tell you another story. I remember sitting there and watching a plane coming down from the far end, a biplane pulling along a message. And I thought, this is very exciting. I hadn't really ever seen that on a beach out there. I wasn't going out there up until that point, because now we had friends that lived there. And I thought, isn't this exciting? Here's a plane, with a trailer behind it that's going to say, "Happy birthday, America," or words to that effect. It's a big celebration. It's a big day for all of us. And I look around, everybody else is just reading the paper, not really paying any attention. The plane comes by, and it says, "Crotch itch?" [They laugh.] And the name of some product. I was never so disappointed.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you knew, in a funny way, you were home.

ROBERT COTTINGHAM: I was home, right. [Laughs.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]