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Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Charles R. Strong,
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Transcript

Interview

CS: CHARLES STRONG
PK: PAUL J. KARLSTROM

PK: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. A taped interview with Charles Strong, Bay Area painter and curator and gallery director, and a number of things; we'll hear more about that. The date for this first session March 14, 1998, and it is being held at the interviewer's home in San Francisco. The interviewer is Paul Karlstrom. I think that covers our information. Well. We've sort of laid out a plan for an interview starting, appropriately enough, I think, in the beginning. So I'd like to get some idea of your own biographical information, your story, then of course moving it to what I hope will be a focus for this first session, and that is, really on the art world in San Francisco in, presumably, the late fifties through the sixties and pretty much that important period of time.

CS: Um-hm.

PK: You came in really in a very interesting point, in the development of the art world here. There were some very important changes that I guess had just happened, or were happening, and you were able to watch them, and so this of course is what I and others who listen to this tape or read the transcript would be interested in. Why don't we start with the easiest possible way, which is something about your family background, when you were born, and where, and the circumstances of your growing up.

CS: Well, I was born on Christmas Day, 1938, in Greeley, Colorado, and I went through high school there. That was a town of about 20,000 people. My father [Ralph A. Strong--Ed.] was a grain elevator operator, from a family of farmers. My mother's [mother: Virginia Lamb Strong--Ed.] side was an entrepreneurial rancher from the Midwest. I always drew, and actually took private lessons at an early age. My mother knew two elderly women, one who wrote children's books, the other who illustrated them, the Gaugh sisters, and on Saturdays I used to go to their house and take lessons from the sister that was the illustrator. I always drew and worked with clay on my own. I was actually thrown out of art class in high school for being so unruly.

PK: (chuckles) Were you unruly in general, or only in art class?

CS: (chuckles) No, I was at that stage, I was not a good student. I liked to hang out with the boys and work on hot rods.

PK: You were sort of a James Dean type, right, Rebel Without a Cause, sort of?

CS: Yeah. It was the hot rod time, and working on cars was the most important thing that I felt I could do.

PK: That would have been, I guess, the early fifties.

CS: Yes. Then my father wanted me to shape up and go to military school, and I don't know why I said I would go, but I went for one year to Kemper Military School, which would have been equivalent to my freshman year. Then I wanted to go to an art school at that point. I went one year, [the military school] was like a junior college, and the first year you're hazed rather severely, and the second year you get to be one of the hazers. I didn't want to subject anybody else to that, so I refused to go back, even though one aunt wanted to buy me a Jaguar car if I went back. (laughs)

PK: Ooh, that must have been a difficult decision.

CS: (laughs) Well, for some reason I was still more interested in hot rods at that time than sports cars. That came a few years later. (laughs) So I was working, took some classes at Colorado State College, and then was working in a molybdenum mine in Climax, Colorado, and I had material from the California School of Fine Arts and California College of Arts and Crafts, both, and I was very interested in abstract painting. I was aware of Clyfford Still at this point, and Abstract Expressionist painting.

PK: How was that, that you came to know . . .

CS: Well, it was through magazines.

PK: So you were seeking out art magazines . . .

CS: Yes. And there was a definite interest in California, and the kind of painting that had come from there. I was attempting to do some abstract painting, but not really knowing where to take it.

PK: I wouldn't expect that they were teaching that, or even allowing that issue . . .

CS: No, absolutely no. There was no real understanding of it. The art classes, like at Colorado State, were very, very conservative, taught by a man who did illustrations of horses for Western Horseman magazine.

PK: Oh, so the western school of art . . .

CS: Right.

PK: Did you try your hand at that, to an extent, since that's what was around?

CS: Well actually, I loved horses, and I rode horses, had horses, but my horse drawings were done at about age ten. (chuckles) Not much survives from that period. But I was working in this molybdenum mine. . .

PK: What is that, by the way?

CS: That's used for hardening of metal, so it's called "molly;" the molly part is molybdenum. It's used for bearings, it's used in nose cones of missiles, and so it was a significant thing to the defense industry. This mine was 13,000 feet high, and people would come from sea level and not be able to breathe and work in it.

PK: But Greeley's pretty high . . .

CS: Greeley's close to a mile high, and so I was used to it, and I'd spent a lot of time in the mountains. So I was earning money there, wanting to go to art school, thinking I was going to work another year, and then in early September of '59, I was in a mine accident. I was working with a muckraker, where I was setting dynamite charges, and untangling the cable of this shovel. This was this giant machine that would blast ore, and then it would be raked out. And I would set the dynamite blocks.

PK: That's where the term muckraker comes from.

CS: Yeah, right.

PK: Boy, I guess I learn something new every time. (chuckles). Cause of all the junk that comes up with it, is that what . . . ?

CS: Yeah, right. It's an interesting term, but I assume that's where the term--when we speak of, when we talk about investigative journalism--comes from. But I set a charge of dynamite that was a little too heavy, and rocks came blasting out at a much greater distance, and I got hit on the head, and shoulder, knocked my hard hat, and it split my hard hat. I was carried out on a muck train, they just loaded me on the train, (chuckles) and I went right on out. And I wasn't seriously injured, though to this day I have a stiff neck that was caused by that accident. But at that point I said to myself, well, this obviously is not what I need to be doing at this point. So I called up--I had both the art schools' pamphlets in front of me . . .

PK: CCAC and California School of Fine Arts.

CS: . . . and the California School. And I called the California School first, and they said if you can get out here within a week, you can get in, even though the semester had already started. So I quit the job, and the next day flew to California, went directly to the art school. Somehow I took the cable car, I was looking at a map, and I figured out that was the closest way to get to Chestnut Street. So I took the cable car, and I asked the brakeman where a cheap hotel was, and he recommended the San Gottardo Hotel, which is in North Beach. So I went down to the school, signed up, and then walked down to the hotel and rented a room, by the week.

PK: What is it? The San . . .

CS: The San Gottardo Hotel. And that building is still there. The bar and lobby of it is where Brandy Ho's restaurant is. You go down just about three doors from Vesuvio's, and it's quite a handsome building, and I think it survived the quake. And it was an Italian immigrant's hotel, so there were a lot of single old Italians living in it. And there were nice Swiss-Italian people who were running it, and it was named after San Gottardo Pass, which I've been over, which is so tight that buses have to back around it.

PK: I've heard that, right.

CS: Yeah. So I lived there for a couple of years. I actually have paintings that were painted in the basement of that, they were called the San Gottardo paintings. So then I proceeded to walk to the art school, and after I think

the first two months then I had the studio in the basement of the San Gottardo. Because I had had experience in doing art for a number of years, had gone through actually another art school that I hadn't mentioned, on Coronado Island, I went there in southern California after the first year of military school and before Colorado, I went for a year, from . . . I'm trying to think of the man's name, he was a W.P.A. [Works Progress Administration-Ed.] muralist, who ran a small art school on Coronado Island, and that was the time that you had to take a ferry across. And I used to park my car and ride the ferry.

PK: It wasn't Lewis, was it?

CS: Monty Lewis?

PK: Monty Lewis?

CS: Yes, I think that's his name.

PK: I'll be darned. We were just offered the papers of Monty Lewis.

CS: That's fantastic.

PK: So he was actually . . . did you find him an interesting guy, and teacher?

CS: Yeah. He was relatively traditional, but a gentle, pipe-smoking man, and it was good training. It was good basic training. And that really was my first real organized adult training.

PK: Did you--not to get you off the sequence here, but, was the artist Ed Garman around at that time? You know, the transcendentalist painter, who actually worked in New Mexico for a while with Raymond Jonson and Agnes Pelton . . . did you have any contact with him, because I think he was friends at some point with Lewis.

CS: No. Since I was so young, I wasn't really brought into the circle of Lewis' friends. But it was a very charming school. It was in a kind of Mediterranean, Mexican-style building that he owned, with, you know, very small classes, some with retired navy people. Actually, not too many young people. But I did some fairly nice drawings at that point. I worked on composition, in that sort of traditional way. But then I got in a car accident, so then I went back to Colorado, and then the story picks up to what I was saying earlier. I went to Colorado State, left there, worked in the mine, and then ended up in California. I was really ready for the intuitive, painterly painting when I got here. And I was independent enough, and there were a lot of mature, independent students at that point, taught by the G.I.s who were in the MacAgy period, which was, you know, Lobdell, Jefferson, Diebenkorn, I don't know whether Weeks was a G.I. but he was there, James Budd Dixon, Oliveira, and Manuel Neri was a young teacher, Donald Weygandt came from Colorado, so it was a very serious group of teachers that gave a lot of independence to their students.

PK: Now you say that you were familiar with Still, with Clyfford Still, and presumably associated him still, even though Still wasn't there any more, did you make that association, that that was the place where Clyfford Still . . .

CS: Yes, well, I knew he wasn't there, but I knew about his teaching stint at the School, and I liked San Francisco, 'cause I'd visited there once, earlier.

PK: I guess what I'm asking is, was that was a factor at all in your decision . . . I realize you called the California School of Fine Arts first, so that's part of the reason . . . (chuckles) you got there, but . . .

CS: Yeah, it seemed there was more of a tradition of . . .

PK: What you were after.

CS: The direction I wanted to go, here. I just didn't know that much about Arts and Crafts. And it turns out there was a kind of a going back and forth between Arts and Crafts and the Art School: Manuel, Nathan, Diebenkorn, you know, some people went back and forth, either as a student or as a teacher.

PK: What was it like? Was it what you expected? What was your reaction?

CS: There was a great sense of freedom, and seriousness at the same time, you know. Having fun, but really doing something what I felt [was] significant for the first time. And after the first year, then the teachers were treating me more like a peer, like a young snot-nosed peer. (chuckles) Like I traded paintings with Jefferson, they would invite me to their studios, you know, and Jefferson used to say, remarks, well you're painting over your head, but that's alright. So there was enough . . . I didn't have to go through a lot of the growing pains that the other students were doing. Of course on one level there were a lot of really good people there that were doing incredibly good work, like Joan Brown.

PK: Manuel was already teaching at that time?

CS: Yeah, he was a young teacher. I think that was his first year of teaching. I think he was just there as a student the year before. And Joan was still there, but she has a painting in the Museum of Modern Art that she did when she was 18. Bill Wiley, Bob Hudson, you know, that caliber of people, that were producing first rate art at the college. That's kind of an interesting thing, because it was probably better work than was produced at any other time by students, by so-called students. Because in the MacAgy period it was incredibly significant that many of those artists didn't really find their sea legs until a year or two afterwards. There were some people there, like John Hultberg, who had his imagery he had discovered, and was painting that as a student, but like Lobdell's early paintings are much different from the imagery that he developed [later]. What I'm trying to say is, between '58 and '65, or '57 and '65 there was a very high level of work that came out of the School from the people we just named.

PK: Several questions come to mind. I guess the first one, who were some of your first teachers? Who did you take classes with? How would you describe their methods, other than the famous fact that they left people alone?

CS: Jim Weeks and Walt Kuhlman were some of the earliest teachers that I had. Bruce McGaw. Bruce he was one more for assignments, one you might say with an old fashioned strictness. Kuhlman would bring maybe in books of someone he thought you should look at, and he would invite you to his studio to look at paintings. Going to exhibitions, going to people's studios, that was all part of the learning process. Depending on I guess, where one is attending, that may or may not happen these days.

PK: Was there much to see around here at that time? I'm trying to think. Of course the museums were in place. Do you remember that it was fairly rich, in terms of what was available to be seen in exhibitions?

CS: What would be interesting would be the Annuals. Like the De Young, the Legion of Honor, the Invitational and then the Annual at the San Francisco Museum [of Art, now San Francisco Museum of Modern Art--Ed.].

PK: What was the quality of the art that you would see at the Annuals?

CS: I think pretty good. The level at that time, you know, a lot of that work still really holds up. There was some very significant work. There seemed to be something in the air, that maybe made everyone work a little harder, or brought the level up. There was a lot of energy, excitement, though it didn't really have much to do with selling or money making, because there weren't a lot of commercial galleries, there were just a couple. I think Wanda Hansen had just started.

PK: Well, Dilexi . . .

CS: Dilexi. Yeah he [James Newman, Director--Ed.] started on Broadway and then he moved over to Union Street. He did a very significant job, probably the most important of all those dealers.

PK: That was a little after . . . I get mixed up with my chronology, for instance, with East/West . . .

CS: East/West was Sonia Gechtoff's mother's gallery. From the late fifties, you know, that had King Ubu, and then the Six took over that same space on Fillmore Street, and then I think very close to them, Mrs. Gechtoff had a gallery. But those were gone by the time I got to San Francisco.

PK: Yeah, that was a little earlier.

CS: Just a little earlier. So there was a little bit of a gap there. The G.I. Bill ran out, MacAgy left, everybody got fired, the art school took a dip for, only for about 4-5 years, and then Gurdon Woods came in as the director, and started rebuilding it with the people that we were just talking about, Diebenkorn, and Weeks, Bischoff, and so forth.

PK: So you feel that Gurdon really played an important role in turning the program around?

CS: Yes. These people were available to teach, the whole university thing hadn't quite taken off, the development of university art departments, and these great people were around to teach. And then actually by the time I left, that was disintegrating, Elmer [Bischoff--Ed.] went to Cal, Oliveira and Lobdell went to Stanford . . .

PK: Yeah, they first actually went to UCLA for a year or something. . .

CS: Yeah, right, then they came up there, right.

PK: So it was a little bit of a dispersal, I guess.

CS: Well, it was a big dispersal.

PK: Partly because, what you're saying, and I hadn't really thought of this, what was much more concentrated changed with the rise of the university art programs, and it simply that that wasn't the case, previously, to the same extent.

CS: No, I think the rise of the university programs did pull all those people away.

PK: And sometimes to different areas, not just . . . they wouldn't necessarily stay here.

CS: Right. Weeks ended up in Boston [University--Ed.]. You know, I did a show of his called The California Years, because that's my favorite period of his work, although I do own one small piece from Boston. But he ended up in Boston, Diebenkorn ended up in L.A., Lobdell and Nate at Stanford, so who was left at the old school?

PK: And then Davis, of course, ended up with . . .

CS: . . . with a lot of them. Manuel went to Davis, Wiley. I don't know if Wiley ever taught at the Art School.

PK: I should know since I just interviewed him . . .

CS: He may have just started at Davis. That may have been his first job. Hudson, he may have taught there a little bit. But the Art School doesn't have the great teachers that it did at that time. But it still attracts good students, so it's still a significant place. I find it kind of interesting, that at many times it's very badly managed, whereas Arts and Crafts is a much better run place. But the kind of attraction of serious students is really kind of interesting, how it still works as a magnet.

PK: Why do you suppose that is? Is that, again, this ongoing tradition?

CS: Well, yeah. That's maybe as close as anything. Well, it's the oldest art school west of the Mississippi, you know that history, so there is something of a tradition there in terms of American time line, rather significant. [TAPE BREAK]

PK: Probably image. What about the image of freedom, that this is a place where you are not going to go and get discipline imposed, but you are going to work within an environment that allows you really to develop on your own, do you think that's part of it?

CS: Well, that's certainly . . . [TAPE BREAK]

PK: Continuing our first session of interview with Charles Strong, this is Tape 1, side B, and you were cut off before you could answer that question.

CS: In my period of time, it was going there for the energy and the excitement to find a place where you could develop. Freedom is I guess, kind of maybe an automatic component of that, but whether one really had thought that they were going there for freedom, that was certainly one of the aspects of it. But it wasn't right for everybody, because of the aloofness of the faculty in the sense of directing the students each step of the way. And many times now university students need to be directed. I keep thinking about that. How were they so different? I guess in some ways you still find some students that have that inner directive, but there was a whole core of people that had it then, and the people that didn't have it went elsewhere. Some people like Ivan Majdrakoff, who I didn't have, I think was probably more of a classic teacher.

PK: Who was that? I don't know him.

CS: Ivan Majdrakoff. He just retired from the Art Institute.

PK: I've never met him.

CS: He would be good to interview, he's a very interesting guy. He must have taught there for close to 40 years, or something.

PK: You had his course?

CS: No, I didn't. I went with the homework assignment people. (laughs) But it was sort of like, Elmer used to talk about when he went there it was a sort of like a religious calling, or something. It was kind of like a monastery where you joined, and everybody knew why they were there, and that sort of thing. And they, these teachers, when they saw a student who was sufficient and was doing quality work, they kind of treated them more like a younger peer. And I responded to that, and I think the painting even rose along with that.

PK: Why don't you tell me, sorry, I don't mean to interrupt, but, using a couple of examples, something about this relationship, it's obviously mentoring of a sort, because they were senior people who had something to offer you, and were your professors. But I gather from what you say, that in a very easy way, at least in your experience, it became more than that, you became friends, or at least you were included, beyond just the school or classroom. What do you remember from those experiences; who are the people that were especially memorable, in your past, in that respect? What about somebody like Hassel Smith?

CS: Well, Hassel I actually didn't know at that time.

PK: Oh.

CS: I mean I was not an acquaintance of his at that time. I knew his painting. I used to go to the Dilexi shows that he had, so I was very aware of what he was doing. When he would lecture or if he was part of a panel discussion, like there was kind of an infamous one at the Art Institute when Wally Hedrick put gin in the water pitcher (laughs).

PK: (laughs) They should do that more often.

CS: (laughs) Right. And that was with John Coplans, Wilfrid Zogbaum, Hassel, and Wally. I'm not sure if I've left somebody out. But Hassel got really ripped, and was talking about Jackson Pollock, and saying that's decorator junk, and Coplans said Hassel how can you say that, and then someone-- Donna Smith was in the middle of the audience--and she said, someone behind her said, his name's not Hassel, it's asshole (laughs).

PK: (laughs) That's how he can say things like that!

CS: (laughs) But he was an outrageous personality at that point, and a terrific painter. And actually, he was a really excellent teacher, too. When I actually became friends with him was in the last stages of his teaching career, and he was teaching at Cal and at the Art Institute, and I felt he was the best teacher at both places.

PK: Um-hm. That was before he went to England, huh?

CS: No, this was after England, this was at one period, when was that, about 1980, when he was teaching there.

PK: Oh, so he was over here.

CS: Yeah. He would take leaves, and he may have been retired from England at that point. I'm not quite sure when he retired. He taught for years in Bristol. But Weeks would gravitate towards serious students, and sort of take them under his wing, and, you know, invite you to dinner. Jefferson was very friendly; you could visit his studio. Lobdell would invite students to his studio.

PK: What would happen? Why don't you recall one or more of those evenings? Would there be several students, a little salon-type thing?

CS: Lobdell was with a group of students, but with Jefferson sometimes it would be just two of us, and Weeks, the same way. So it would be different. But there was always whiskey involved, which we think about that now, it really was another time.

PK: But they were supposed to be bohemians, you know, to a certain extent. (chuckles)

CS: But it's kind of interesting, you know, because I never drink whiskey now. And how it was just what you drank. Like when I came back from England I went down to Lobdell's studio with a quart of whiskey and I missed dinner at my wife's parents [Willis and Hazel Forbes, parents of ex-wife Deanna Forbes--Ed.] house, and everybody was totally furious at me, and I was this sort of basket case when I got there, (laughs) but he wanted to hear about England.

PK: He was at Stanford then?

CS: Yeah. But he was still at his studio, working at 9 Mission Street, that great studio building.

PK: Do you remember what you would talk about? Was it just enjoying one another socially, or did it tend really to be a lot of art talk?

CS: There was a fair amount of art talk. Talk about Still, and Goya, and other contemporaries: Diebenkorn, Weeks, Bischoff. What was interesting, which I felt from the beginning, and I really didn't get it from any of them, there really wasn't a competition between or disdain between the figurative and abstract painters.

PK: Oh, interesting.

CS: No, I didn't feel that at all. They were all part of the same club. The admission to the club being that you really worked hard and gave it all you could, and put all you could into your work.

PK: What's interesting about that--and I'd like to hear any observations you have on that phenomenon--what's interesting is that typically realism and nonrepresentational/abstract art have been now set up as opposing camps, and I don't think we view it quite that way any more, but there was some of that. The one tending to be more backward looking, and the other obviously representing the advanced, progressive art, abstraction. But you say, at least in this case . . .

CS: By the time I got there I think the feathers had been smoothed over. I think Hassel, that was at his more outrageous period, and outspoken, he was always outspoken. He, I think, felt that David Park abandoned ship.

PK: Um-hm. Hassel thought that? He said that?

CS: Yeah. I think he made that pretty clear, that he felt that it was a defection, and a failure of nerve or whatever. But by the time that I arrived I think that everybody had really mutual respect for everyone else. The figurative painting, except for Weeks' case, had grown out of abstract painting, so it was really painted in the same manner.

PK: Yeah, if you get a close-up, you get a detail of it . . .

CS: Yeah, if you block out part of a figure, it becomes very abstract. So Diebenkorn and Bischoff had respect for abstract painters, and vice versa. And Weeks had never painted abstractly, to my knowledge, he never painted nonrepresentationally. But he had respect for both sides. Like I used to go to his drawing class, where he'd have a model set up, and I would just take some of the color from the set-up, and be doing abstract drawings. And he thought that was fine. But I felt that I should be there, and not just be working in my studio, and he respected me to do that. So we would talk about color.

PK: That's quite interesting. Because then it becomes, certainly, a different kind of exercise.

CS: Um-hm.

PK: Rather than getting the line right, it's much more responding to some other aspect, a different kind of presence. So in your memory, then, and this is also based on time spent talking with some of these principals, in your memory, this antagonism between the two schools really, for many of them, simply didn't exist. They truly saw themselves engaged in the same enterprise.

CS: Correct. That was very definitely the case. And certainly when you take an overview of it, that's very clear. Because they weren't, their basic approach was not that much different. It was to do with paint, and energy, and a lot of use of intuition, a lot of reworking, it just didn't have Conceptual Art or other, it didn't have Minimal kind of concerns, you know. Other movements that came on later, to this group of painters, they both would look at those and say, what are those people doing? From our point of view, that's not the way art is done. Wiley was a disappointment to Lobdell, because he thought that he was going to be doing abstract painting, and he moved on from what you could call some abstract expressionist work, relatively quickly. And, really, if you look at his, what he did earlier, that shouldn't have been too much of a surprise, but . . .

PK: Sounds as if Lobdell, then, might have been a little less sympathetic to re-introducing the figure.

CS: Uh, no.

PK: I mean, if he was disappointed in Wiley not working abstractly.

CS: Well, when Wiley started writing on the canvases, and doing the puns, and that sort of thing, that's . . .

PK: That's what he didn't like?

CS: Yeah. That's what he didn't like. Because he would draw the figure himself. Where Jefferson was more of a purist in terms, in nonrepresentational terms, but Lobdell used to draw with Diebenkorn and Bischoff, and then later with Oliveira and other people at Stanford.

PK: What about this idea of purity and abstraction? It seems to me that you yourself, as open as you and others of your colleagues may have been, you yourself were quite clear in the method or style that you wanted.

CS: But it's very impure abstraction. It's very muddled in the clarity of it. It's not clean, pure, abstraction.

PK: You mean your work?

CS: Generally, San Francisco abstract expressionist work.

PK: I see. Well, why don't you tell me what you mean by that.

CS: Well I think there's a lot of overtones of other references. There's references that come in, and then they kind of maybe slide away, you know, like landscape references, figurative references, different types of moods. So it's a complex, more symphonic, I think, ideally, more symphonic kind of statement, and it's not reductive and pure.

PK: I see.

CS: In fact the New York School is more reductive and pure even in its Abstract Expressionism, probably except for Pollock, so that is one of the great differences about San Francisco, and it's finally beginning to get a little daylight, with Susan Landauer's exhibition and book, to really see that there was a different look, and a different way of making art out here. And in the best sense of the word, it was provincial: in that it had its own identity that was not New York.

PK: Well, I think that's true. And I think it's interesting to try to identify that. I wouldn't mind talking a little bit more about that, certainly on two levels: one, your observations in a more general way, about this difference about the nature and the character of the abstract work and gestural painting here on the West Coast, and then more specifically, how you saw yourself, how you came to see yourself fitting in, because this was, in a sense, the incubator where you and your work evolved and developed. And it seems to me pretty consistently so, but maybe you think otherwise.

CS: Let's take a little time out here. [TIME BREAK]

PK: OK. We're starting up again.

CS: The differences between New York, which everyone for years seemed to think--and this is partly because of the art press, and the power of the New York museums--seemed to think that everything radiated from there, and that San Francisco was a satellite of New York. And of course us who lived and worked here didn't really feel that was the case. And what are those differences, and how was the early painting--the early modernist painting from 1945 on--how was that different? It's kind of more boisterous, many times, kind of rougher, more loose-ended, in some ways maybe kind of chancier. It was certainly less commercial, though you could say people like de Kooning and Pollock had a lot of that sort of energy. But I could think of many other painters who seemed to have a more ordered, precious approach to it.

PK: You mean like [Barnett--Ed.] Newman, and . . .

CS: Well, Newman, bless his heart, probably really wasn't a very good artist, though I liked him as a person. I met him in England, and I liked his feistiness and his brightness. I think maybe that he was just a little before his time, because there's a lot of people running around now that have better ideas than they're capable of presenting. But, yeah, [Mark--Ed.] Rothko was a great artist, but there's a very European kind of sort of foundation there, in a sense. I don't know if it has anything to do with us being farther from Europe, and having less of those surrealists, less influence of the people that escaped the second world war, which were very important to an influx of sophistication and high level art into the New York world. California was more on its own, in a way, at least northern California.

PK: Do you see, then, a kind of West Coast virtue, a rugged individualism, a determination to, you know, mind one's own emotions, or the self, if you will, is it that kind of notion that you think is descriptive, or inherent in the West Coast work? That kind of abstraction?

CS: It may not exist now, but I think at one point there was. The thing is that there's so much information and the stylistic thing has really broken down, you know, and it's sort of a wide open scene, so that may not be the case now, but I think at some point that it was.

PK: How was it talked about then? We're looking, of course, now retrospectively, which is what historians do. (chuckles) And you're remembering being involved, at the time, and there must have been, I guess, some self-consciousness on these very issues we're discussing.

CS: More in the thing that we had discovered a great thing, having this kind of independence and having this control over your life in the studio, you know, where you could make anything happen, and just being really exhilarated by that. Having the great sort of feeling that this is really fantastic, that one's able to do this. But I don't think there was really a comparative thing, and probably not really analyzing it in the way that we do now. In looking back at it, you can see where it has a kind of independent, where there's a bunch of people plowing away at their independent furrows, and then maybe some of them are kind of more in this field, and some are

more in the other, but everybody is kind of going their own way. And kind of talking less, I think, than New York. You know, there was no club, the living wasn't as tough out here. I don't think that artists felt, you know, that except for their friends, that they weren't forced together in a way like they were in New York. There, the club was kind of a survival thing.

PK: So in your own case, at least as far as you can remember, you didn't pause to look at your work and think of it, well, as unique to you, of course, but as participating in specifically a Bay Area aesthetic.

CS: But wait a minute, I do. I knew it was different. I think that was clear. No one felt that San Francisco was a satellite of New York. The quality was just too good, and it was too independent, and it wasn't something that emanated, where you took the lead of what they were doing and then you kind of rehashed it. That wasn't it at all. That was very clear. I think it's very clear that anytime you put West Coast people up next to East Coast people. Sometimes there's kind of a blending, like early [Edward--Ed.] Corbett is so kind of gentle and austere, but actually in a way it's more kind of oriental than anything in New York, you know. I think that part of it was People moved to New York for different reasons, but I don't think they went to New York because they felt that's, they weren't really getting it out here. And many times better painting was done here than what they did in New York.

PK: So it could have, in many cases, been a career move. Their careers would have been better served.

CS: Right. And they were, many times. [BREAK]

PK: Here we go. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. The second interview session with the painter Charles Strong. This session is being conducted on March 30, 1998 at the interviewer's home in San Francisco, the interviewer being, again, Paul Karlstrom. Charles, we've had a chance to briefly discuss how we might want to let this, or help this progress, today, and I should say that we're primarily focusing on your early work, probably as defined in the Triton Museum's exhibition catalog of 1996, that's the Triton Museum [of Art--Ed.] in Santa Clara [Charles Strong/The Early Work 1960-1966. Santa Clara, CA: Triton Museum of Art, 1996--Ed.], and by that definition the early works are from the period 1960-1966. So we have that as a temporal point of reference, so this is the period we're going to be dealing with. And I'd like to start with your, with the artist statement in the catalogue. You make what I consider two significant remarks--at least two--and they raise issues that I'd like to pursue today with reference to key works in the catalogue. And let me read from your statement, written, presumably, in '96. First of all, there is a quote: "I was a serious young person looking for a visual way of investigating both the natural and the internal world, to delve into the realm of imagination and ideas with significant use of the intuitive." [p. 5--Ed.] That's one point, one idea. And then directly following that you say, "It is my belief that Abstract Expressionism is the most original and profound American art movement to date, and I am grateful that the factors of time, place, and attitude fused for me to be a young participant, pushing, working, to extend the parameters without losing the soul of that style of painting, for almost thirty years." [p. 5--Ed.] It seems to me two aspects of your artistic thinking, and, if we can use the term, behavior, emerge out of these remarks, at least two. First of all, an idealistic belief in the power of art to participate in culture, to affect culture, to build it, and, I gather from what you say, to provide insight. Secondly, there seems to be a consistency in your objective stemming from what appears to be your commitment to a particular aesthetic, a philosophical ideal. In both cases, idealism seems to be at the heart of your artistic enterprise of Abstract Expressionism as a pictorial expressive means, one that you've chosen. OK, I realize that this is a big introduction, but I think that these are the things that I would like to discuss in terms of key works and then the ideas, which we'll do in just a minute. But first of all, the first question I'd like to ask is, that you didn't operate in a vacuum, and of course you never have claimed to, you worked within the Bay Area in contact with certain artists and people that you admired, and learned from, and so forth. But beyond that, what were some of your sources and antecedents, artists or traditions that you discovered and came to admire, and that you think, that you feel made a difference in your work, and maybe you can name some specific ways.

CS: Well, Goya is a very large influence. His use of light and dark, and in his later work, his way of presenting very significant social problems, and dealing with them, and then, in the very late work, the Black Paintings, with the, dealing with the problems of kind of an internal nature, of kind of dreams, and monsters, and the power of the unconscious. Have you seen those paintings in the Prado? The Black Paintings?

PK: Um-hm. Long ago, but . . .

CS: Yes. Well I think that's one of the most powerful rooms on the face of the planet. All of those were painted on the walls of the house that he lived in when he was quite elderly; I think it was his last house in Spain, before going to Bordeaux, and then he died in Bordeaux as I remember. They were removed from, the house was going to be destroyed, and they somehow removed these oil paintings from the walls, I guess chipped away the plaster from behind the walls, removed the walls, laid them flat, chipped the plaster away and then transferred them to canvas. But they're really extraordinarily powerful paintings: Saturn Eating His Child [Saturn Devouring One of his Children--Ed.], The Witches' Sabbath, which the painting on the front of the Triton [catalogue--Ed.] is

named after.

PK: Yeah, we'll be discussing this.

CS: Yes. We'll come back to that. His etchings, *The Disasters of War*, both in terms of their meaning and their content of the war, and then their abstract meanings, great use of light and dark, and drama, that I've always respected. And the period of time we're talking about, most of these works have that sense of drama through light and dark, even though we're dealing with color, very aware of the values of color.

PK: When did you first see those?

CS: I didn't see them in person until I went to England in '64. But I was very aware of them from 1960 on. I had a book with quality reproductions at that time, and I was aware of prints, and I had purchased a print at one point. I had a really good book of his drawings, and then of course at the Prado I saw the drawings and many of his other paintings. In a way he's like the first modern artist. I think a number of people have said that. His sensibility just reads, for the most part, very directly today, and you don't really have a problem of it being another culture from another time: you can still strongly react to it. The other artist is Rembrandt, for a lot of the same reasons: great draftsman, powerful emotional paintings in his late years, the self portraits of himself when he's a tired, old man staring in the mirror, are probably some of the greatest self-portraits ever done.

PK: Let me just interrupt, if I may, a moment.

CS: Of course.

PK: Do you see yourself, then, participating in a tradition that involves this introspection? The self-portraits, of course, are rather famous for their psychological revelation, if you will. Do you feel that in your almost abstract paintings, in your gestural paintings, that there is some point of contact with that aspect of Rembrandt's work, in other words, the self-portraiture, and the self-reflection, if you will, the subjectivity in that sense.

CS: Yeah. I've admired them tremendously, and I'd seen the paintings relatively early on. And it's hard to say how those kind of paintings come in. Now actually, some of it, the influence of Rembrandt is in the paint handling. Because the paint handling is, by today's standards I guess you'd say would be relatively tame, but it was still painterly and still had that kind of love of the material. And when they're x-rayed, it's been shown that they actually started very, very loose. But I did admire the way that they were painted. I was very aware of the significance of paint. But the psychological aspects would be, I guess, more for other people to interpret whether they're there or not. But he certainly was on my mind. Those two would stand out, above most others.

PK: Let me put the question another way, to slightly recast it. You yourself mentioned the self-portraits and the psychological dimension and so clearly that's something that, whether reading about it or perhaps experiencing the images themselves, affected you. This, then, is something that you point to as a powerful quality, a distinguishing feature, of these works. And, so I guess what I'm wondering is if that doesn't become part of the Rembrandt package for you, and you know, the paint handling and so forth becomes maybe, could be seen as a vehicle to do other things, but certainly maybe to convey some of that mood.

CS: It's quite possible. Yeah. It's a whole package, and I'm not dissecting it and pulling one thing out and leaving something else. The way that he arrived at that image, with all its dimensions, was through paint. And we're responding to that, 300 years later.

PK: Were there other artists, old masters as we call them, maybe not in older work, but perhaps in one or two works, that held a special interest for you?

CS: [Paolo-Ed.] Uccello, *The Battle of San Romano*; Piero della Francesca, in that sort of quiet power. Those are artists that I had admired, and in 1964 was able to seek out and see their works in the flesh, but I had been, again, been looking at them for years.

PK: I wonder what it is, you said "quiet power," I think, in terms of Piero. What I wonder, might it be about Uccello, that very famous, constructed study of the poses, and so forth, the battle scene. What I wonder would you take, if anything, from that, and make part of your work?

CS: Again, it's just something that's really admired and it's hard to figure out what did rub off from that. The thing that I've always wanted to--particularly in these early paintings--be responsible for every inch of the canvas and yet not try to kill the intuitive aspects of it, to let them breathe, but then to make the whole thing really work, and be able to really scrutinize it and have it still be solid. *The Battle of San Romano* is a really solid painting. I mean it's incredibly dense, but there is deep space in it too. So that has a lot of that aspect to it, of that kind of boiler-plate composition that adds up to a very dynamic whole. Piero is more kind of open, in a way, and the quietness is kind of a stately, even in his battle scenes, you know, it's kind of like a ballet, or something,

with the horses. You don't really see a display of emotion in his work, which is kind of interesting, except in the horses' eyes. In the Story of the True Cross [Discovery and Proving of the True Cross--Ed.], the battle scenes, in that, the ritualistic manner that the soldiers are proceeding in is one thing, but then the eyes of the horses read in a kind of more expressionist way, which I've always found very curious. And I'm very familiar with the Arezzo paintings, which it was a good thing that I was, when you go there they're impossibly high up, and it's really dark, so you don't really . . . I mean, it's a thrill to be there, but if you don't know what you're looking for, it's really hard to see some of those brush strokes. Particularly that one, which I think was one of the worst.

PK: Boy, you better try and plan another trip soon, because you know that they've been doing a restoration.

CS: Yes.

PK: And they have scaffolding up there, I mean I know because Ann and I went in May . . .

CS: And they allowed you to proceed up the scaffolds?

PK: Yeah, we had to make reservations and pay a little fee, but you go up in small groups, and you get, like, this close.

CS: Wow! That would be a super trip.

PK: Nobody's ever seen them like that, even when they were being painted.

CS: Right, he didn't even see them that way. Yeah, that's fascinating. Yeah, you're absolutely right, I need to do that, as much as I love them. The Madonna del Parto [phon. sp.], which has been moved, it used to be in this tiny, funky little chapel which was run by this commune, this village commune, now it's been moved into Monturqui [phon. sp.], the new museum in Monturqui. That was incredible to see that under those conditions, too. And a very sensual painting, and in an interesting way.

PK: Well, there's no question about it that these are stunning images to see. In listening to you, one of the things that struck me as quite interesting was your remark that you said you felt a sense of responsibility to every inch of the composition of the painting, but which suggests a kind of tension, and perhaps almost control, that it's organized, you know, very carefully and the parts in relationship to one another, which isn't what we think about, so much, in terms of, you know, the freedom of abstract expressionism.

CS: Exactly.

PK: But on the other hand, then you say, that's one goal, shall we say, conscientiousness, almost, but on the other hand, you want to, I think you said, leave room for the intuition to play.

CS: Yeah, the intuition is probably the most important of those two, it's the one that really says which way the direction of the painting is going. It's sort of from the seat of your pants, or from the pit of your stomach, quality, rather than from the center of your brain. But it's that battle of trying to balance these things out. That was the problem that happened with, I think, a lot of the painters in the abstract expressionist direction, that the more they painted on it, the more cerebral it became, and the less passionate, and the less from its goals. So it was trying to balance the thought, the preconceived ideas that you're bringing to it and the spirit that's there, and to not paint that spirit out.

PK: In a moment we're going to turn to some of the works, although I want to make sure that if you have any other sources, you'll have a chance to mention them, but I'd may make just a general observation which maybe, now, you may want to respond to. One of the things that I find very appealing, or striking, about your paintings and images, is that there is this kind of organization. It's very thoughtful, they're very well composed, and, you know, I still see them as active, there's an energy there. Now as I'm thinking of it, the run-of-the-mill abstract expressionist's work, action painting, often isn't that way. The hardest thing is to maintain the sense of freedom, of process, but bring enough control to it that it, you know, reads as an image that--I'm trying to think of the right vocabulary here, maybe you can help me--something that is not random, something that even though it has this kind of energy and direction, and so forth, it's contained as a single statement.

CS: Well, the kind of image is important in these paintings. One thing, to back up a little bit, about randomness. You know, you can do something to get something to happen, just start throwing paint at the canvas, and then you respond to that, so then you start making decisions. So even in a very great painter, like, say, de Kooning's prime period--not the last period that was kind of scandalously shown--all of his drips and marks really make sense because he was really an accomplished painter, you know, at the height of his powers, able to make things happen in a very spontaneous, intuitive way, and then, you know, even heighten what they're doing by his decisions. So, it's only the people that just kind of throw paint and don't make any decisions don't know what they're doing.

PK: Do you feel that in some cases, with some artists, or in certain moments this became almost then, a goal or an aesthetic of its own, suggesting, almost like chaos theory or something like that? Do you know any artists that would sort of argue that, or say that this was good?

CS: There may have been, not so much here. But I think what happened is that it became kind of almost a mannerist kind of thing, of kind of like, a certain kind of look. Like you could get a look of, like, struggle, and of this kind of intuitive look by certain kind of calculated, technical tricks. There are certain technical things you can do. I think Diebenkorn talked about things kind of being too easy, and why he switched to the figure in '56.

PK: Which I suppose you don't agree with, I mean the too easy part, I mean it's necessary . . .

CS: Everybody has different problems. You know, he needed to put something else in front of him, to be challenging to him. And then he went back to painting something that was, in a way, similar to what he was doing before. And the irony with him, it always looks easy. (laughs) It always looks very elegant and very easily done (laughs). We're going to the particular images, here. The Rocky Mountain Quartet, there were four paintings that were done early on arrival in California, they're about six feet square. They have a fading in and out of light and shadow; there's a kind of a clustering of suggestions of volumes, with a kind of coloration that was an intuitive use of this experience of living, camping, and really enjoying and caring about the mountains that were thirty miles from my home town.

PK: I'm much more interested in what it brings to mind for you, and associations that might be made. I don't mean necessarily the stories, or anecdotes, or landscapes, but art issues for you, in a work like this. This is a remarkably accomplished work, in my estimation, and again, this is something that I found in seeing your work, you know, in the show, Susan Landauer's show, this is one thing that really resonated, came through to me. Again, there is a kind of control, a thoughtfulness, a compositional savvy, in these works, where you are requiring the work to be effective as a kind of composition. In 1960 were you just finishing? I forget the chronology. Where were you at that point in terms of the Art Institute?

CS: I was just there.

PK: So this is, in effect, a student work. Is that right?

CS: It is and it isn't.

PK: (laughs) You know what I mean, it was done while you were a student.

CS: Right. But I always had my own studio, and the teaching was so minimal then. I was considered by Jefferson a peer by this time. After one year of looking at these paintings, we traded paintings.

PK: Oh, is that right?

CS: Yeah. So he felt that these were very accomplished paintings by a young artist. Because when they [Jefferson, et. al--Ed.] were in school under Still, they didn't consider themselves really students, either, you know. I don't think since then have there been students like there were then, in the late forties or in the fifties. I don't run across students like Bill Wiley and Bob Hudson and Joan Brown, and Manuel, you know, and Jefferson, and Lobdell, they're not there any more. They may be very talented, but it's not the same thing. So these paintings, I mean, that's kind of remarkable that they could be done in this kind of, what you might say a more restricted environment, where you're supposed to be learning about color, and . . .

PK: Well, they're certainly not exercises, if student work suggests exercises.

CS: No, they certainly aren't.

PK: No, they're not. Let's turn the tape over. TAPE 2, SIDE B [session 2, tape 1, side B; 30-minute sides]

PK: OK. Continuing our interview with Charles Strong. This is session 2, tape 1, side B.

CS: Yeah, there's many, many paintings, like, Wiley, I think, won an Annual [San Francisco Museum of Art annual competitive exhibition--Ed.] when he was an undergraduate. Joan Brown has a painting of hers in the Museum of Modern Art that she did when she was 18 years old. The quality of work that was being done at that time was extraordinary. And it holds up. These paintings, I've been scrutinizing them, and other people, more recently, but I've been scrutinizing them since they were done, and, in general, they get better. (chuckles) I mean, I had more criticisms of them at the time. So they've kind of taken on a life of their own that is kind of beyond me. It's not like a painting or something of the last five or ten years, where you might even go back and change something. I have no right to do that anymore, (laughs) with these paintings, because they're some place else. So.

PK: Let's talk a little more about this group, if you'd like to, because it seems to me Well, they're a quartet, there're four of them. And you obviously consider this your first really major statement. And their reference is to landscape, as you've said, and to your own experience, so they're not removed from human experience at all.

CS: No, they're very . . . I mean, I consider all of my work very impure abstraction. It's very polluted abstraction, in that, so there are always references coming in. But it isn't a disguised landscape painting, either. It's forms that have energy and shape and some references to landscape, but then there's also references to figures, and to mythological creatures . . .

PK: Mythological creatures? Like what? Which one are we looking at now? Are we looking at Number 1 now?

CS: Both of these, this has a kind of a suggestion of a head, and then it kind of dissolves away.

PK: Yeah, it does indeed.

PK: Was this conscious, or were these discovered forms? There's a difference.

CS: This would have been arrived at intuitively, but then left because of this process that an artist goes through of looking at it: do I want this to stay? And the obvious answer is yes. In this case, I wanted that kind of white, kind of profile shape, and then the kind of stumpy wing coming out of that.

PK: So it's like a strange winged dragon or eagle, or . . . ?

CS: It's more of a human reference there, and this is more of a kind of clipped wing.

PK: Oh, I see. What about with Number 2?

CS: Yes. There's a powerful kind of conversion here, of shapes, and organic nature, organic in their type, and a strange kind of, you know, this is a funny kind of symbol that's coming up out of that that, you know, has a certain kind of head-like quality, but then it sort of dissolves again and then it really isn't that. This shape is kind of silhouetted by this sort of smoke. This is a strange kind of almost like an eye coming out through there . . .

PK: So if you look throughout the composition, as you move your eyes from portion to portion, place to place, you can perhaps extract and construct image forms.

CS: Uh-huh. But then they kind of dissolve, and what the overall impact is these forms moving and colliding into this, kind of jelling at this point, into this composition that has a certain mood to it.

PK: You know, it looks to me, I'm sure it was part of your intention, it's so well composed, it's so tied together through compositional means, but at the same time, it seems to me, maybe you tell me if this is part of what the goal is, it seems that there is this potential for movement and shifting, it's almost palpable.

CS: Yes. Yeah, movement and symbolic energy through movement has always been in my work. There isn't much of it that sits still. And the kind of suggestion of power, and the suggestion of something about to happen, is there also.

PK: Of course, biomorphism is something that we associate with much of OK, for instance, here, it may be that our period is too obsessed with sexual parts, and so forth, but this shape here could easily be read as a vulva. Have you ever thought about that, or am I . . .

CS: In later work, I purposely did use that, but at this point, I don't know if I thought about it at this point, but it could easily be interpreted that way, I see that. I don't really have a problem with that, either.

PK: No. Well, whatever it is, (laughs) it works well there.

CS: But there is this organic thing, of kind of figurative kind of elements, kind of forming and dissolving. You know, you're not just, like, stuck with a leg floating in space, but it's a shape that's suggestive, and then it dissolves back again to something else.

PK: So it's this transformation of material in the world. Would you go so far as to say that this turns out to be one of the themes of your work?

CS: The thing of shapes kind of emerging and then kind of dissolving again in this kind of abstract space is one of the themes, yes.

PK: What about the--and I guess I can say that this seems to be, well, not in every case, but in many of the cases, a characteristic--your work tends to be often very dark, and I think you mentioned to me the other day

when I was over at your place, that you think of these as nocturnes.

CS: The dark ones. The very dark ones, yes, are definitely nocturnes. Where there's an absence of light, the light is many times scaled way down, like with the dark blue and purple and black one that's in the living room, the modest-size one. And it has that kind of underwater kind of quality, too, because things are very dark under there. But sometimes there are yellows in them, but in general it's a different kind of light that's in there. There's a number of paintings that fit into that nocturne category.

PK: Yeah, there's a moodiness, it seems to me, in your work, and not that you don't encounter it in other Abstract Expressionists' work, but it strikes me, that I would say that in those works of yours that I've seen, that it's one of the characteristics, the sense of mood, and, I don't want to jump ahead of myself too much here, but I'm very fond of the Symbolist painters of the late 19th century, they call them "poets of the imagination" and so forth, and some of what you talk about so far, in connection with your own work, seems to me to be very much related to Symbolism.

CS: Well, we forgot to talk about Redon, which was an influence at this time. His use of dark as a mystery sort of space, the kind of bizarre sort of indentions that he would do, not so much the paintings, more the graphics, the earlier work. So, yeah, there's a definite relationship there.

PK: What about the . . . there're a couple of Americans that come to mind, and of course, as an Americanist, I feel obliged to ask about them, (chuckles) and besides, you're an American artist . . . but, again, I don't think it's too far-fetched to make some comparison or connection between some of your paintings, some of those images, and the works of Albert Pinkham Ryder.

CS: Again, that's someone who I was very aware of, and I saw paintings very early, at the National Gallery in Washington. And was impressed by the power of them, being small paintings and having this extraordinary sense of scale, and having this dense kind of painted surface where he worked on them over and over again, and sometimes he'd get paintings back and he'd keep working on them, that he'd sold. That was very important, actually, and in terms of seeing the paintings earlier, that was done. I mean, you know, being able to stand in front of the paintings, I did that quite early.

PK: When was that, do you remember?

CS: That was in the late fifties, and then again in '60 or '61.

PK: That certainly, then, certainly anticipates or predates most of the work we're talking about now.

CS: Right. I was very familiar with the images of the European artists, but I hadn't seen a lot of them, except for the prints of Goya. But Ryder, I just really spent a lot of time in the National Gallery looking at paintings. Who else did you mention?

PK: Well, Ryder was specifically the one now.

CS: Well, Dove, for Americans, and I saw his work relatively early, in the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

PK: What was it about Dove that appealed to you, besides the fact that they're great images?

CS: Well, there's a kind of American, sort of kind of funky, kind of clunky honesty about them. When he was in Paris, I remember some paintings he did then, like in 1906 or something, and they have a different look. But then when he was trying to deal with this nature, and abstraction, and his paintings, like the Fog Horns painting, do you know that one? That's just extraordinary, how that really emulates, about how you get sound vibrations from that painting.

PK: Which, of course, as you know, was one of the Symbolist goals, to try to bring together the union of the arts, but to find the correspondences between the visual and the audio, with music . . .

CS: Well, that painting is a really great example.

PK: Do you feel that you achieve that, or is that of interest to you in some of your works?

CS: Well some later series were, actually, dedicated to music. Yeah. There was a Lyric Song series, with these elliptical shapes that I was relating to music, and they were arranged in different ways, and with different color palettes, and then they were named after musicians.

PK: They date from later, though.

CS: Yeah, later, they're out of our period.

PK: When were they, just for the record?

CS: They were in the late seventies. But these are not silent paintings in the way that we were talking about Piero's paintings having a kind of quietness. These are noisy. I love jazz music, you know, at the school there was the Studio 13 jazz band, that had the great association with music, and you're going to videotape one of the guys that's continuing playing in that.

PK: Richard Shaw.

CS: Richard. And Charlie Parkers is still playing with that, isn't he? And he's one of the original guys. He goes back to MacAgy, and Elmer, and David Park. And the school parties were a good example of having a lot of fun with music. But then I was interested in be-bop, but Charlie Parkers is a great artist, and Dizzy, and then the progression of that into Coltrane.

PK: Well that's associated, of course, with all the enthusiasms of the entire Beat Era.

CS: There is a definite relationship to abstract expressionism and jazz, in a number of artists. Rothko, you might think of Wagner or somebody else, (laughs) or Brahms. But with these works . . . why don't we go to Witches' Sabbath, and we were talking about Goya earlier.

PK: What year is Witches' Sabbath?

CS: I think that's '61. Witches' Sabbath, this tall painting, it's ten and a half feet tall, and about five feet wide, and it's in two panels, for no real reason, other than just getting the paintings around easier, so it could have easily been one painting. But it has that image that I sort of associate with the vein, or the life spirit, or the life energy flowing through it, that I think really comes from Blake, which is another one I forgot to mention earlier. That was very important, and I'd seen quality reproductions of his work early.

PK: What was it about Blake, then, again, that appealed to you and that you feel you've brought somehow into this?

CS: Well he had this great--I think it was an etching--great River of Life thing, where this kind of flow of bodies, this kind of anaconda, this kind of great snake shape. This related to Still, and Lobdell used it too, but I think it really goes back to Blake for probably, me, and maybe possibly for Lobdell.

PK: Oh, is that right? Did you ever talk with him about your interest in Blake, or anything like that?

CS: Yeah, he would say he was interested in Blake, but admitting, he's so cagey, he probably wouldn't really tell you. (laughs) But it would be a good question to ask him. But I see this as more of a River of Life shape. The ascendance of these figures, and of this spirit line, of this vein, of, you know, this sort of vessel that this energy is flowing through. And this top shape, this floating shape is like a Last Judgement shape.

PK: How so?

CS: Well, part of this is going up, but part of it is going down. It's another vertical shape, but it isn't just an ascending shape, it's sort of, but maybe because of this diagonal, this part of it is going down, and this part of it is kind of going up.

PK: Look, here's the sun in the background, here.

CS: Yup. Well, we've got everything. (laughs)

PK: You see? Pretty soon we'll look at this and think that it's not very abstract at all. (laughs)

CS: But it is, too. It's that kind of thing where it isn't spelled out too far, and then you can really see it for the abstract qualities of it. And then, of course, in the Witches' Sabbath of the Black Paintings, there's a goat figure that's kind of silhouetted, and this is reminiscent of that goat figure. And I wasn't thinking about that goat figure, exactly, when I did it, but I was aware of it. And then sometime after I did it, I said, my god, that's like that Goya Witches' Sabbath painting.

PK: So that's how the title came about.

CS: Yes, right.

PK: I'll be darned. Before we move on to a couple of other paintings, I want to go back to Ryder. This is my own particular interest, I've always been actually very interested in Ryder, wanted to work on him, didn't really have the opportunity, except indirectly. But there was one point in which I was looking at a Ryder, you know, in a

book, and at one place nearby there was a book open to, or maybe on the cover, Clyfford Still. And I was absolutely struck by, in almost all essential ways, I thought that these were practically the same. And I thought, My Lord, look at that. So I'm interested to hear of your interest in Ryder, but beyond that, it would seem to me that he would be a natural, and I know to a certain degree that this is the case for American artists with the advent of Abstract Expressionism, as somebody to whom they found that their work had affinities.

CS: Yeah, I think that there's a lot of artists that would say that that's true. I think even Pollock talked about it. And again, Still would be worse than Lobdell about admitting any influences, and he's not around to ask, but there is a kind of power of natural phenomena, you know, like a breathtaking western landscape, and Still's work has been related to that. And in Ryder's case, it's obviously very small paintings, but there's this powerful natural phenomena that's in them. And mood, and paint, and sense of scale even though they're small. So, yeah. And the abstract quality of them, that kind of hard-hitting, no sort of Mickey-Mouse trappings that you have to weave through to get at the essence of the painting.

PK: Yeah, it's just right there.

CS: It just hits you, you know, the shape of the boat, and the water, and you don't need to count the grommets in the sail. It's there just to knock your socks off. Yeah. He's probably more important to many American painters and abstract expressionists than probably any other American painter.

PK: Yeah, I would think so. And I always wondered if there was some kind of acknowledgment at the time . . .

CS: Well, I've read statements about Pollock, in which you don't see this direct a relationship as you do with Still, but Still was very sharp, and I'm sure he was aware of it. One thing about Still, there's a great early Miro painting that there was a reproduction of, in the, I can't remember the name of the painting, I'll have to look it up, it was a big painting with a lot of symbols in it, a relatively early painting, and there's a good reproduction of it that was in the art school library, and Still checked that out a lot, cause when I was in school, a friend of mine that was working in the library said, you know, Still checked this reproduction out a lot. (laughs) That kind of fascinated me.

PK: That's pretty fascinating. Dog Howling at a Moon? No, let's see . . .

CS: No . . .

PK: It was a very famous one, and I can't remember the title right now. Cattle in . . .

CS: Yeah. It might have been one that's called Cattle in Landscape, or something like that. I'll see if I can figure out which one it was. But that just goes to show, in both those examples, that nothing comes from nothing, there is this continuum of art, and you're growing, you're learning and growing, and some people just say, well I'll steal something from any place I can, but the point is you add to it, the point is you take something and then make it your own, and add to, you know, the building of this culture through art.

PK: And that takes us back to your statement, your artist statement, where it seemed, taking you at your word, that very early on, you saw this as a kind of calling, I mean, this was the way that you were going to make your mark, make a difference.

CS: Oh, no question about it. There'd been enough kind of goofing around and not really focusing, and I had a lot of training, see, that was one of the keys, I'd had a lot of art training, through the lessons that I had when I was ten and eleven years old, and just doing a lot of drawing, and, you know, I was fairly versed. I mean, I was familiar with Matisse at age 14, and, so even though I got thrown out of art classes in high school, so I was ready for this opportunity, and I think that I was very opportunistic, and everything just fell into place for me to be able to do these kind of paintings as young as I was. So there was, you know, some experience behind it, although if I'd gone there as a true freshman, it might not have worked either.

PK: No, it wouldn't have been the same. After all, you studied with Monty Lewis.

CS: (laughs). Right, he helped.

PK: As an aside, you should know that we talked with his daughter, with Monty Lewis' daughter [Kathryn Lewis Crane--AAA.], and I think we're going to get the records of that art school that you attended on Coronado Island.

CS: Then my name should be listed as one of the . . .

PK: This is how we're going to check up on you, to find out if this is the case.

CS: Right. But he didn't give grades, as I remember. It was just a place to study. So you can't look up any embarrassing grades (laughs).

PK: OK, then maybe we won't bother.

CS: But no, no, you should look up to see if these records are accurate. But it should be there in 1957 or so.

PK: OK, let's turn, this tape's almost over. [BREAK]

PK: Continuing the second session with Charles Strong. This is, the date is March 30, 1998, and this is tape 2, side A. Charles, I thought that we would look back again to how we started, actually started the interview, and I was reading a couple of statements you made, and I want to just reiterate the one, because I'd like to talk about a few more works with this idea in mind. And that's the statement you made, and again here I quote. "It is my belief that Abstract Expressionism is the most original and profound American art movement to date." And then of course it goes on. And the reason that I reiterate that is that it's a pretty strong statement, and I bet you would probably enjoy telling me why you think that. (chuckles)

CS: (chuckles) Maybe not. Because then I'd have to back it up. (laughs) Well, originality, so much has come from Europe, and actually, I was sitting here talking about European artists being an influence on me, but in terms of a way of arriving at a painting, there wasn't anything--though it maybe took some aspects of Surrealism, and it took, you know, we were talking about Miro, possibly influencing Still--when all the stuff of these great European artists was thrown into this pot of these brash Americans, you come up with something that there was no equivalent of in Europe, and made an enormous impact when it was first shown in Europe again, and then that generated, you know, that jump-started the Germans again. It jump-started everybody in Europe, and all of the contemporary Germans, I think, owe an enormous debt to Abstract Expressionism. But just when you look at it, you have Mondrian, Surrealism, German Expressionism, Picasso, Matisse, and Abstract Expressionism maybe takes elements from here and there, but it is a more indigenous, pure, it's more of an invention than taking something from Cubism and this other stuff that I just talked about. I don't think I'd get too many arguments that way. Then the quality of it, you know, the greatness of some of that work, when it stands; not all of the artists are going to stand, like Barney Newman is probably one of those who's not going to. But like the great de Koonings, and lyrical Rothkos, I mean the transcendental Rothkos, and the great, lyric paintings of Pollock, and the tough San Francisco version of Abstract Expressionism, has got some really terrific artists in it, and these paintings are going to stand. And particularly when you look at what's being done today, it's not like they're in the same planet. I mean it has so much more weight and significance, the best examples of it. That's not to say that something can't come along that would be equal to it or better than it, you know, improve on it or, you know, just demolish it, but it hasn't happened, and I don't think I'd get too many arguments that say between 1965 and 1998 that . . . there actually haven't been a lot of coherent movements since then. I mean, there's been a lot of diffused pluralism.

PK: If that's a movement; that can't be a movement.

CS: No. I'm not doing the most eloquent defense of my statement, but I really think that it's true, and somebody like Kenneth Baker, obviously, would not agree, because he was kind of hatched under Minimalism, and was horrified, actually, by some of the paintings that were in the Abstract Expressionist show at the museum [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art--Ed.].

PK: Yeah, he wasn't real positive in his review, was that right?

CS: No. He doesn't get it. He just doesn't get it. So you're going to get different opinions about it. And of course, this is my background, but I've looked at a lot of painting, and I'm taking a kind of historical perspective on this at this point. The best of these paintings hold up. And I haven't seen a lot that's equal to them.

PK: What--not that I want to put you in the position of having to rank, to do a revisionist ranking, of the major figures--but I am interested, particularly among the Bay Area artists, those whom you feel really over time are holding up. Obviously you're allowed to leave yourself out of it, because . . .

CS: (laughs) Do I have to?

PK: (laughs) Well, no, no, but presumably, since we're sitting here talking about you. But still, despite Susan Landauer's adverse, and very noble effort, and I think, effective, and it makes a big difference, but the names don't come to mind as quickly as the New York school. And I'm not interested in any more of this east-west stuff.

CS: Yeah, you're talking about the quality. Well, James Kelly did some masterful paintings at the time that he was here. I'm not sure when he left, '57 or something. Those paintings are very sophisticated, I think they hold up really well. The Diebenkorn abstract paintings are great, although there's bunches of different periods of them. The Berkeley ones are kind of almost into landscapes, but some of the earlier stuff, from the forties, like the Albuquerque paintings are great. The early Lobdells are very powerful statements; Jefferson is probably, he's kind of like a painter's painter, his work is difficult for a lot of people to grasp.

PK: Is he still around?

CS: Yeah, he's very ill. I'm actually kind of handling his estate, even though he's alive.

PK: We, later on should talk about papers.

CS: Yeah, yeah. Some of Joan's paintings, though there was just a short period of them, are extraordinary. There's only like a year and a half of them, and they're more kind of things, in some ways, than kind of elusive abstract images, but there're still some really terrific paintings that would fall under the perimeters of Abstract Expressionism.

PK: Yeah, yeah. What about--and believe me, I don't want to put you in a position of having to critique your colleagues, and all that--but there were a lot of artists who were, at least for a time, working in that mode. And many of them, that's all they did. Or, to put it another way, they obviously had found what they wanted, what worked for them, and they continued it for many years. And I was thinking about them, and I can't even remember all their names, although we have a lot of their papers. But I think of somebody like John Saccaro, who I gather at one time was really viewed as one of the talents, isn't that right?

CS: Yeah, I think he's quite a good artist. I don't think he's quite in the league of the names I just mentioned, but I think he's a good artist. I think you could also put him up against some people who have had a fairly big name in the East, like Bradley Walker Tomlin, or somebody, that would be very respected in New York, but I think that somebody like Saccaro would be as good as he is. I was thinking about that show. James Budd Dixon was a really terrific artist that was even under-rated here. Because his personality was so kind of defective, you know, with his alcoholism, that he wasn't taken seriously. He didn't look that great in Susan's [Landauer--Ed.] show because the best examples weren't shown. But he was a really significant artist, and a lot of people have forgotten that. Michel Tapiès kind of dug in and was very interested in him, and some of his paintings have ended up in places like Australia. The Oakland Museum has a number of them, I think, but they're falling apart, and that's I think why Susan didn't use them. She may have been too fussy about the condition of a painting. The other one, Corbett, of course, was more accepted in New York, and those are not, they don't have all the ingredients of Bay Area Abstract Expressionism because they're, you know, actually kind of oriental. Which actually you could just say was part of the West. But the kind of elements that were in the San Francisco thing, this kind of grittier aspect--which he's not a good example of it, but most of the other people are, that I've mentioned--isn't as prevalent in New York, and that really kind of gives it its own unique character for me. And I think a well-chosen show could hold up with those people. People like [Ernest--Ed.] Briggs were good, [Edward--Ed.] Dugmore had some very good paintings in that show, Sonia Gechtoff, Jay [de Feo--Ed.]; which came first, the chicken or the egg? (chuckles)

PK: Which do you think?

CS: Well, I think it had to be Sonia. She's the more mature artist, they were both living in the same building, and Jay just kind of pounced on it with a vengeance. But neither one of them lasted a really long period of time, either, you know. One thing that I think happens with that kind of emotional kind of painting, is the tendency for burn-out, and, of course, Jay burned herself out on one painting, basically.

PK: Mythic, now.

CS: Right. And the painting was better at earlier stages, and I saw it at earlier stages, and to my way of thinking it was overworked. She should have had two or three paintings.

PK: It wouldn't have been as heavy.

CS: Right, it wouldn't have had this mythic status then.

PK: Well, that's a pretty good review; it mentions many of the names.

CS: Oh, I forgot Hassel [Smith--Ed.]. Hassel brought a different element to it, in what Elmer [Bischoff--Ed.] called the "Crazy Cat" syndrome, where there were these kind of zippy, kind of calligraphic, kind of goofy marks that he would do that added a kind of humor to pretty much a pretty serious, heavy lot, including myself. You know, sometimes I'd attempt to do something that had humor in it, but I just couldn't do it. It would get painted out. That kind of light spirit, without being shallow, that he possessed, I think, was really extraordinary.

PK: I'm trying to remember; I think that he came off fairly well in Susan's show. There were some good examples of his.

CS: Yes. But if any number of these people would have gotten better . . . well, Kelly went east, but then he started changing his way of painting, and he had a very quiet personality, and he never really made any

headway. Sonia did. But I think, with the right set of circumstances, if these people had been in New York, they would have been much, their reputations would be much larger, on a national and world scale.

PK: You know, that seems to be pretty much across the board, for most artists. California artists I talk with grapple with that question, and acknowledge that it's something that they've thought of as they pursued their careers. What would they have to give up, what would they gain by a move. Obviously, you've made a choice. I should ask you, actually, rather than talking about them, what about you? You made a choice . . .

CS: I just like living in the West. I was fascinated by New York, and at one time there was a relatively serious thought about moving, but that didn't happen.

PK: Oh, yeah? Why, is there a reason?

CS: I just kind of felt at that time, actually, that it was a little late. This was in the seventies. If I would have moved directly out of school, it would have been an interesting thing. But the style of living seemed to be too harsh, and then, actually it's gotten worse in terms of artists. And, I've really enjoyed San Francisco and the climate, and it has a lot of great artists in it, so it was stimulating in that sense, though the museums and the galleries were way behind New York. But the quality of artists living here I didn't think was.

PK: You know, what's interesting to me, and I can't remember if Susan dealt with this--of course we're talking about Susan Landauer, who's written about and put together a big show on, practically in defense of Bay Area Abstract Expressionism--I can't remember if she made any point of this, or any observation, but the view from the East is that there is a lack of seriousness, in almost any endeavor on the West Coast, and part of the reason, for the most part, is that the conditions of living are too comfortable, and that sort of subverts the possibility of serious work. And yet you look at, at the very least, you look at this Abstract Expressionist heyday explosion of activity during those years, and it's nothing if not serious looking. In fact, in some cases, it's almost darkly so, and my question, I guess, is that to the extent that's true, in your view, doesn't that seem a little strange, because on the one hand we have this very attractive, very beautiful environment, very comfortable set of circumstances, and then to have out of that . . . maybe it's the fog, what do you think?

CS: (laughs) There are plenty of broke things, even if it's a pretty place. It's still tough, and most artists haven't had a lot of money. I've heard a lot of horror stories, and early on I had to work pretty hard just getting money together. So I don't think it's been this kind of romp through the pasture that the East Coast people sometimes think. And actually the museums would be one of their criticisms too, because they'd say, how can they develop when they don't have a Met? When they aren't able to reference great art? Which I think is, you know, is a legitimate beef. So that means you'd have to travel somewhere.

PK: That's easy to do nowadays.

CS: Right. But they're so kind of snotty about the rest of the country, that they haven't really given it a fair shake. There is a difference between southern California and northern California. San Francisco artists in general have a kind of heavier, moodier quality, particularly from this time period, than southern Californians. If you had a southern California show, I mean, I'm not sure how many people you'd have in it from this same period. John Altoon comes to mind.

PK: Well, at least until you had the Ferus [Gallery--Ed.] in the late fifties . . .

CS: But most of those people were from up here. The kind of abstract painters. There's Kienholz and Altoon, but who else? I mean, there's Jay, and Lobdell, and everyone from here.

PK: Yeah, there wasn't the same Abstract Expressionist mode, it was much more the geometric abstraction.

CS: Right, so there is a little difference there. The San Francisco thing was very focused.

PK: And even Craig Hoffman, I guess, was participating.

CS: Craig Hoffman comes to mind, yeah. And Ed Moses. Yeah. Now they're coming back.

PK: Let's stop talking about these other people. Let's get back to looking at, we have time to look at a few more of your paintings from this catalogue, which we should remind the readers of this transcript is the Triton Museum catalogue of 1996, Charles Strong, The Early Work.

CS: Looking at a reproduction of Hemlock, a painting from 1962 in the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, it was given by David Devine, who was a very perceptive collector who very early on bought a number of these early works, and he gave this in memory of Thomas Albright to the SF Museum. It's 96 x 68", a vertical painting with a large white shape in the center of it, and then this kind of very sinister, sort of severe pointed shape coming in from the right and kind of piercing into the white area. But then there's a complex

space going on in there, where over the shoulder of the white area is deep space, so it's got a complex kind of shifting of space in it. Susan Landauer felt threatened by this painting.

PK: Why, what do you mean?

CS: Well, she just felt that this was a very aggressive painting. The San Francisco Museum has a later painting, from the early eighties, that's actually an acrylic painting with relatively flat color, and, I guess the comparison to this was, well, she felt on the one hand we have this very peaceful, elegant painting and here we have this tough, what she felt was an aggressive painting.

PK: Probably because of that knife-like form.

CS: This kind of pointed form, yeah.

PK: Or, phallic.

CS: Yeah, maybe that was it.

PK: Maybe that was it. But we don't need to read too much psychology into it. (chuckles)

CS: No. But it is a tough painting. David and I, when he bought the paintings I knew that they were going to go to different institutions, and I wanted this to go to the San Francisco Museum, even though I knew that it would remain in storage for a long time. (chuckles) But Susan discovered it and brought it out into the daylight, and it looked great in the show. But there is a certain elegance in that white, and a kind of beauty about it. It's not, that toughness is not ugly, which is kind of interesting.

PK: Well, did it surprise you, her observation? This is not how you felt about the painting.

CS: No, I could see that. Because there's an element of violence in a number of painters. The love of Goya who dealt with extreme violence with the Disasters of War, and all sorts of other kind of, even psychological violence with the Caprichos. You can look at some of the Disasters of War and be horrified and say, god, this is really beautiful, too. But there is a kind of tension and a battle between this pointed shape and the shape beside it. Where they're kind of vying for superiority, or for survival.

PK: So it's a kind of combat, in a way. A pictorial combat.

CS: Yes. With that energy between those shapes.

PK: And that brings some of that element that you seek, of movement, of course, in there.

CS: Of course. It's movement intentioned by the shapes and value and color and surface. You want to talk about this one, or . . . ? I was just going to move to this one.

PK: Yeah, well why don't you choose which.

CS: Of the two, OK. Now we're going to talk about the Harrison Street Mural which is 1962 also, it's the largest painting that I've done. It's three panels that are vertical; each one is 70 inches, just two inches under six feet, by 144 inches.

PK: Each panel?

CS: Yeah, each panel, so it's like 12 feet tall and almost 6 feet across, so it adds up to be 12 feet by 17 ½ feet. It's probably a major statement in terms of a mural size, heroic, sort of scale. Again, it has that spirit, life line, vein.

PK: Oh, yeah, right. Running right across, diagonally.

CS: Yes. And then kind of countered by a more kind of floral lavender and blue shapes coming up toward it. It's symphonic in the sense that there's a number of kind of movements that are happening in it, and then some of them have different qualities and moods, so you have the strength and the kind of determined element of the life line vein-shape with the flow of energy in it, and then you have the bit more lyrical color with the lavenders and the blues, and then over to the . . . right there are these jagged shapes that are somewhat . . . [TAPE BREAK]

CS: . . . menacing.

PK: Would this be, in a way, running the gamut of mood . . . [TAPE BREAK]

PK: Continuing Charles Strong, session number 2, tape 2, side B. And we weren't, I wasn't paying attention, so my question was cut off. We were talking about the Harrison Street Mural, your largest work, 1962. And you were describing these different shapes, forms, colors, and their qualities within a composition, I guess you'd have to say really united by this diagonal red, another one of these Blakian spirit lines, or whatever you want to call it, anacondas. And my question was simply, I was curious as to whether you thought of it as embracing this gamut or range of mood and emotion, and so forth, of human experience. Does it strike you in a way as that kind of a statement?

CS: I was very aware at the time I was doing it that I had these different moods going on in it. There was a more lyrical, gentler aspect to it, and then there was this more menacing side, and then there was the kind of determined flow, and then there was that circular, sort of, again, kind of a centrifugal force, of the, another way of the life line shape evolving into a cluster that's up on the right. So I wanted, like I was saying, I wanted a symphonic, complicated statement, and I felt that all of this space allowed that to happen, and that happens in murals, where you go from one event to another. When you have enough physical space to be able to do that, and over the height of the 12 feet and the width of the 17 ½ feet I was able to hopefully run the range of that kind of event and experience.

PK: Are you at all interested in the Chinese scroll approach with landscapes, where you unroll and move through a landscape? Do you see some of these large-scale works perhaps working in that way?

CS: Somewhat, yes. Large pieces, the element of time comes into them more.

PK: Right. Right, exactly.

CS: When you don't experience them, particularly close up, you don't experience them all at once. You have to get a long ways away from this to look at it overall, but which was possible, too. But the paint quality, and the experience of walking in front of it from one side to the other was something I wanted the viewer to do.

PK: Because presumably, if you respond, if you're attentive, and you respond to the different shapes and colors and forms in some "appropriate" way, whatever that may be, then there is very much an experiential kind of encounter, which does take time, as you move. And it would seem to me that there is this element, this emotion, as well, actual, real time of it, but then emotion through mood and experience. I didn't say that very well, but is this what . . . ?

CS: Yes. By proceeding from left to right you go through kind of an emergence and through the delicate color, at that kind of lower cluster in the center panel, and by the time you get over to the other side, you know, you've changed worlds, in a sense. In some ways they're not compatible worlds, and yet they're existing here in this overall composition.

PK: Which is very much the way real life is.

CS: Yes. And the way the great frescoes are, too, where you move through a series of events that are many times hard to reconcile.

PK: I think that's really an interesting way to look at the work. I wonder if that isn't part of the success, finally, the human dimension of Abstract Expressionism, which often has been, which sometimes has been criticized for what is perceived as being a distancing from the human experience. But in fact if you look at it, if you critique it, describe it this way, it's almost an analog for human experience.

CS: The criticisms of it was probably more earlier. Maybe after Minimalism, I don't think it would be criticized. But the touch is always there. But how the Minimalists would criticize it would be over-emotional, kind of blubbing. But the best of it isn't. The best of it has got intelligence and commitment and emotion and a deeper human spirit than most Minimalism.

PK: I realize that it's simplistic in a sense to even state this, but there are those, and the uninitiated at least, who would look at this kind of painting and think, very mistakenly, in terms of design, you know, that it is simply a challenge of combining shapes and colors and textures in a pleasing way.

CS: But we're talking about the vocabulary of artists. You know, the artist has these materials that he uses, and he's making this physical thing: canvas, paint, color, you're talking about this vocabulary, and then what they do with this vocabulary. It's been the same vocabulary since the cave painters. The materials have evolved some, and then they're evolving more into technical aspects now, with computers and that sort of stuff. But it's what the artist does with that vocabulary, so all paintings have that kind of abstract nature, just taking this stuff, and then making something out of it. And some would be more designy than others. But the cave painters really knew what they were doing with their charcoal and their iron oxide; they went right to the heart of the matter. And that's, I think, the great thing about abstract expressionism, is wanting to get at that essence. And so, the

shapes and the composition, the design if you will, is all pointed at that end. So there's nothing kind of frivolous, there's nothing that isn't focused for that purpose.

PK: Beyond that, though, and maybe this is where that "blubbery" part comes in, . . .

CS: (chuckles)

PK: The fact of the matter is it's not just getting to the essence of art issues, although that's very much a part of it, using the vocabulary and so forth; but at its best, this kind of painting is very effective in touching emotions and sort of creating analogs and connections.

CS: That's more what I was speaking about when I was talking about the essence. That's the kind of emotional center of it, not the plastic center. You know, more the spirit of it, the kind of thing that defines it, you know, more of the definition of its heart.

PK: Let me ask you this, because this is very important, and it's in a way a final question, at this point, but it also is one that becomes evident right in the beginning. And that is it touches on the continuity of your work, and the fact that you found a mode of expression which suits you, which seems to continue to provide you with what you need to do, with what you seek to do as an artist. I gather from our discussion that these are the reasons that this is so for you. This effectiveness of Abstract Expressionism getting to these essential concerns, including the emotional.

CS: This is even carried over, though I work really a completely different way now, I see it as related to this. It has to have this emotional impact. It has to have that energy, you know, arriving out of the materials.

PK: Did you want to take a look at, I see you have another one.

CS: Yes, why don't we finish off with a nocturne. The absence of a lot of sunlight, darker colors, this painting Harrison Street Nocturne Swirl, 1963, 70 x 69 inches, is a lot of umbers, ochres, and tinted muted greens, and some black. The kind of swirling shape which the title alludes to, this kind of tight cluster, but the strong thing about it for me is the color. And how this color gives a certain mood with really reduced light, but not a reduced emotion. You could say that an absence of light could be almost like dying, and like I said earlier, I never thought of black as really related to death. But just as being dark, just not having light, just an absence of light.

PK: I remember when we were looking at the paintings at your place, and we were talking about the darkness, and I can't remember this exactly, but several things struck me. One was that with the darkness, those certain points that emerge out of it, that are given, that are transformed, that are given a very different kind of quality, and maybe it has to do with different ways of seeing and apprehending. That, you know, in darkness we have to relate to our world in a very different way, and certain things then become so important as points of reference. I don't know.

CS: Well, they're certainly dramatic. I mean, when you are proceeding through two areas of very close value color, and then you come to a point of higher or brighter value color, it has a real sense of drama. And that kind of timing is one thing that's very apparent in the nocturnes. A lot of muted color, then where it's even lighter, it's still is very kind of dense, you know, it's almost like there's a light behind it. And then coming up to this little shot, little tiny shots of color.

PK: And what about this strange face? It looks almost like a, well, demon or a skull, or something, is the way I read it, this being the eyes . . .

CS: Yeah, that is probably not as apparent in the painting itself, but sometimes these disturbing kind of Rorschach things that can happen in abstract painting. Sometimes they're painted out, and sometimes they're left in, you know, when I see them. And that never really bothered me that way. I don't think that's as apparent when you see the painting. But sometimes I will see that kind of thing that I didn't see before. But this one I remember, and that doesn't bother me. But there's a use of dry pigment ochre that I mixed with different color.

PK: (chuckles) See what I mean? In this reproduction, anyway, this is very, very much a . . .

CS: Yeah, that doesn't come out as much in the painting.

PK: Too bad; I like it.

CS: (laughs) Well, you can still find it there. It'll still be there for you.

PK: Right. Well, this is good. I think it's been helpful to actually . . . It's too bad that people, you know, the researchers, won't have the benefit of actually looking at the, but, what the heck, they may well.

CS: Well, if they have a book.

PK: Yeah.

CS: They can be looking at the catalogue as they're listening to the tape, and it should make some sense.

PK: Well, good. This has been very interesting, and, I think, very useful. I think we covered a lot of good ground.

CS: Yeah, I think we did, too.

PK: So, let's call this a wrap, and thanks.

CS: Very good.

PK: OK.

[END OF INTERVIEW]