



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Reuben Kadish,
1992 Apr. 15

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Interview

RK: [beginning mid-sentence] in 1930, after having first been brought here by my parents, and I felt that the introduction that [inaudible] had given me to the Renaissance was just one part of it, because the energy and vigor was not in his painting. The energy and the vigor that I saw in [Jose Clemente] Orozco and [David Alfaro] Siqueiros I felt was much more contributory than what some of the Americans had to offer.

SP: But you sought out energy and vigor.

RK: Oh, absolutely.

SP: It was like a thing in itself.

RK: I felt that there was so much mediocrity going on in people like Arnold Blanch, in--well, no end of painters, even those painters that were around [Thomas Hart] Benton, you know, the Grant Woods and the rest of them.

SP: [James Stuart] Curry--

RK: There was a vitality. Yeah. And then the Woodstock crowd was so mediocre. No, I definitely did, so it was Siqueiros at a point when I was starved out of New York; and I was in Los Angeles on a visit, and Siqueiros came there.

SP: That was '32, wasn't it?

RK: Yeah and I immediately volunteered, right afterwards, to be his assistant. He accepted and I as his go-boy--go for this, go for that, you know.

SP: The "go-for," [he laughs] beginning.

RK: Yes, the first go-for artist. Never expected any remuneration.

SP: Oh yes, sure.

RK: And enjoyed the intensity, the vigor of the guy. He had a tremendous charisma. Benton, likewise, was a wonderful person to be around. The main thing that I got out of these people is that they were interested in big ideas. They were interested in--

SP: Explaining the world, I guess, how it works in human form. They weren't about from alone or anything like that, they were philosophical.

RK: Benton, for instance, even though he kept preaching Regionalism, really would have loved to have been a Renaissance painter, you know? It didn't work out that way. But I think they were very important individuals in the impact that subsequently was going to take place in the development of people like Jackson [Pollock] and [Wilhelm] de Kooning, and of course there were other elements too that moved in too.

SP: What was the time you spent with Benton? At the Art Student's League?

RK: No, I didn't study with him. It was mostly a matter of through the Pollocks, Charles Pollock and through Jackson, and at parties.

SP: And he made that impact alone just because of his personality.

RK: Because of his presence, because of his personality. You know, you don't have to listen to what an artist has to say at every moment that an artist--you know, you can teach for years on end and nobody's going to listen to you, and then maybe you'll meet somebody in a very short period of time and it will just hit you four-square with a two-by-four and open something up for you.

SP: And Benton and Siqueiros were these two.

RK: Those were the two that did that. And of course since Siqueiros invited us, we painted a mural in a workers' community center so-called which was a Communist front, and it was Sandy [McCoy], Phil [Philip] Guston,

Sandy's youngest brother--no, Jackson was youngest, Sandy was the one above Jackson--

SP: Sandy McCoy?

RK: Yeah. And sent the photographs down to Siqueiros, and Siqueiros loved them. He said, "Come on down, we have work for you to do here." So we went down and Siqueiros had been offered the mural in Michoacan and several others had been, but who wants to go off into the country and give up this marvelous big city in Mexico? So these dumb Americans [POL laughs] went off into the country and we painted a mural there. You're familiar with that--[POL assents] And came back and snuck into the WPA under the table.

SP: What year did you join the WPA? At its inception?

RK: We started with the Treasury Project. And at that time Feitelson [phon.sp.] was in charge of one section, Merle Armitage, who was an entrepreneur and dance critic.

SP: The world go back and forth.

RK: Yes. And [Stanton] Macdonald-Wright. Those were the three that sat on the board, and we snuck in under them behind their backs and we got this project, this mural, which we painted, The City of Hope. And they couldn't do a thing about it, about getting rid of us, because the International Ladies Garment Workers Union was backing us, since they didn't dare fool around with the unions at that time, you know--you start making an enemy of the unions with the WPA. And then of course Phil and I split up. I went to San Francisco, I got a mural to do there, and Phil went to New York, which was unfortunate; I thought we could have developed something in California. But every opportunity that I have had since that time I went to New York. I felt that was where the thing was going to be, the place that an artist should go and develop.

SP: I remember your notes in the previous interview where you thought that San Francisco was kind of dead and provincial. Despite all the efforts there it never really got off the ground.

RK: Well, I did 20-odd designs for murals and only one of them was accepted. They were too flamboyant, they were too revolutionary, they were too this, too that. Actually they're quite quiet, quite conservative [POL laughs heartily] you know, they're not wild, they're perhaps slightly colorful.

SP: These are murals to do around San Francisco?

RK: Yeah, community centers, schools, and places that.

SP: But this was the board up there? The board wasn't Macdonald-Wright at this time?

RK: Oh, no, they were southern California. The northern California board was -- the board itself was fine, it was the councilmen, the members of the board of education -- I remember an architect, Timothy Fluger [phon.sp.] I did a design for San Francisco State College and it had to do with the first atom-smasher, the Lawrence Lab, across the way -- well, it was a vigorous, energetic thing, and it was too wild as far as they were concerned. So he gave it to someone else to redesign, so that watered it down and made a little piece of nice mishmash out of it, you know?

SP: Your material at that time had dynamic images --

RK: Very dramatic.

SP: Very aggressive, moving images, and the movement unsettled these people in its way I gather.

RK: Well, whatever it was, it was more than I could take and I felt that eventually I should get back to where you're not being looked upon as some kind of a freak.

SP: Which was New York. And then the War broke out. And you did the war work.

RK: Right. I worked at Bethlehem Steel, I worked in the shipping industry, and we built destroyers and submarines. A very good experience. Pearl Harbor day came along, and then the offer to become a war artist.

SP: That was '43?

RK: No, it was before that.

SP: This was one of the regular Army art units?

RK: A regular Army art unit, part of the Corps of Engineers. And I naturally accepted it. I wanted to go to the

European theater but you didn't have much choice, so people in charge picked up the various artists that they thought the most suitable. For some reason the West coast people, like Lucien Labaudt and Millard Sheets, myself were sent to the Asiatic area. And there were a number of others -- Charlotte Shannon from the South; there were a number of others.

SP: And your charge was to record the War?

RK: Yes! Of which there was a very little war going on. I sold an awful lot of drawings.

SP: That's good.

RK: Sure it is. Alas, I don't charge enough.

SP: Let's return to this: so you were selected to go over -- were you given any basic training? Did they try to make you guys soldiers in six weeks?

RK: No, they really didn't. They showed us how to go over the side in case we were attacked by a submarine. We were not in the Army, we were civilians.

SP: You were treated as civilians just sort of attached to the army?

RK: That's right. The status of a captain, so we ate in the officer's mess hall.

SP: That must have been decent. Beats C-rations.

RK: We were in the "front line," so-called. There was a guy by the name of General Bookner [phon.sp.] who afterwards made a horrible reputation for himself as the general in charge of the Korean prisoners in the Korean War; he must have been a real son of a bitch. He invited us all to dinner and I ate at the General's table. Jesus, absolutely marvelous dishes started to come up, and the next day I took a shower -- had tin cans that were warmed up you know. Filled full of water--and then I see the chef, the cook over there. So I went down and talked to him. He'd been the chef at the Chambord.

SP: Very good! This is excellent.

RK: I said, "What did you make all this stuff out of?" He said, "Oh, just -- I make it, I make it"-- he was Greek -- "Oh, I make it out of what I can get a hold of." Well, leave it to General Bookner to have picked himself a sergeant that really knew his cooking.

SP: Where was this?

RK: This was in Burma. It was like eight or ten miles behind the lines, it was the General's headquarters. So, I mean as far as eating is concerned, as far as living is concerned, I didn't live any different than most of the GIs. I had my own quarters, which was split bamboo boshu [phon.sp.] -- have you ever been in the South Pacific? [POL says no] You know, they take this six inches of bamboo and split it on one side and open it up, so the floor is like this, and you sleep on it that way too. And I played poker with some Australians and I bought a couple of Australian Army blankets, one of which I still have, believe it or not, I use it to wrap my sculpture; and I laid that down and then had my sleeping bag, and so forth and so on. It was an exciting experience, I must say.

SP: Well, it must have been thrilling and grim at the same time.

RK: Yeah, well of course. I was interested in documenting what I thought was at that particular time the important part of what was going on there. And the famine was one part of it, and a very poorly trained Chinese Army was another part of it -- trained as best it could be trained; most of which eventually went over to the Communists.

SP: No, they couldn't match the Japanese troops.

RK: But the point was that they'd trained these guys, they put them up against the front lines, and instead of fighting the Japanese they're fighting their own people, the Communists. The Communists would open up with their horns at night: "Shoot your officers and come over to our side and we will fight the Japanese together." er Which they did, you know?! And eventually they built up a big enough army so that when the time came, the Communists took over all of China. So I came back to San Francisco.

SP: First you were in the Army and then the span of the Army units, life then took over. You did this for about a year?

RK: Oh, it was more than a year.

SP: More than a year? Until '45? That's almost two years.

RK: Maybe. I don't remember exactly. Whatever it was, it gave me an opportunity to do a little-- I had a lot of trouble with Millard Sheets, who was my boss. He continued on and I didn't. I don't know whether you looked at his work or not, did you?

SP: No, I haven't looked at them recent.

RK: I mean when you were in the Army?

SP: Oh, at the Army Art Center? I probably did but I looked at a number of people's.

RK: It was very wishy washy.

SP: Yours was the most aggressive among I saw -- the most horrific, the fiercest, also the most interpretive. It was really --

RK: I'm trying to think -- I think the guy's name was Toby Wyant [phon. sp.]. I think he was an AP correspondent, one of those leg men that just sends information in; and he got drunk one night, we were having a little party, and he told Millard off. "You know, you son of a bitch, you take all of his energetic ideas, you take all the vigor that he has in his work, and you water it down and you make it acceptable, so that Life magazine --" You know, he really gave it to him. I felt pretty good about it.

SP: [laughing] But then you were in trouble.

RK: But then I was in trouble. Bad trouble -- this is the man that's supposed to be my boss. Which was true. I mean, he took drawing that I had of a mother and child and he made it into a nice, sweet kind of thing. Well, you get paid back in the end for what you put into it. But I saw some of the stuff and it's pretty wishy washy. You'd think it was a holiday, you'd think it was a teaparty and not one of the most ...

SP: A lot of stuff that's very descriptive and just notations. They called it journalism. Yours wasn't journalism.

RK: It's not journalism, no. You take a photograph by [Robert] Capa, that's not journalism, somebody's putting something into that; he's not adding anything, he's not deceiving anybody, but it's more than just straight reporting. And you can't say -- I came into an airport and there was blood all over the tarmac. I said, "What the hell happened, was there a wreck yesterday and they didn't get a chance to wash it off?" "No, no. No they captured two of our pilots, they must have been alive because they had a bullet hole in their heads; they cut their nuts off, they put them in their mouths, they sewed up their mouth, they flew over the airport and dropped their bodies."

SP: This was the Japanese doing this?

RK: The Japanese, yes.

SP: To the Indians?

RK: No, to the Americans. We went out, we captured ten Japanese, we laid them down on the tarmac, we ran over them with steamrollers. And that's why all the blood was there. Now, and the next day you land there in an airplane and you look at that, you know, what are you going to do? You're going to start painting watercolors, flower paintings, huh?

SP: It sounds like an experience -- it obviously deeply affected your work. Forever.

RK: Well, it deeply affected my work.

SP: And yourself. Could not help. There's always Millard Sheets in the world. So you did that for a number of years, then you came back?

RK: Then I came back and started working in New York.

SP: And then you revived your old friendships with people -- Phil Guston and Jackson and -- Charles Pollock had left by that time.

RK: Charles Pollock was in Michigan.

SP: That's right. And Benton had left.

RK: Benton was in Kansas City, yes.

SP: Nevertheless Charles would come back --

RK: Did you overhear us saying that Sylvia [Pollock] was in England? Sylvia was Charles' wife.

SP: Yes. He died a couple of years ago.

RK: Francesca [Pollock] is their daughter. Regina tried to reach Sylvia and she reached Francesca, their daughter, and then Sylvia called a couple hours ago saying -- I said "We're all going to come." She has a big buck-wide bed and we're all three of us going to sleep in this big wide bed together." She said, "Fine, fine, then there'll be four." So I said, "Great. Let there be four, the more the merrier." At any rate. It was on that occasion she said, "It's hailing and storming and snowing and raining, don't come to England now." I said, "Don't worry about it."

SP: Then you saw Charles too.

RK: I would see more of Jackson than I would anyone.

SP: Did you show him your drawings of the War? You must have at that time.

RK: Yeah.

SP: He attempted some himself, I think.

RK: Whatever it was, I must say that even at that time he probably had as much impact, more impact on me than I ever had on him, even at that time. Even at that time artists, believe it or not, like [Arshile] Gorky were having an influence. Even before Pearl Harbor, Gorky was recognized among artists, and we were in San Francisco and after the Spanish Civil War a guy by the name of Fred Thompson had met Jeanne Reynolds [phon. sp.] in Paris and brought her back to San Francisco to live with him. And he had a place at Stinson [phon.sp.] Beach, and since Jeanne had known [Isamu] Noguchi and Noguchi knew Gorky, when Gorky came out to visit San Francisco, we were at a picnic together and Gorky was looked upon with great respect. Even in 1936...paydays, I remember seeing Gorky walk down 8th Street, you know?

SP: Right around here.

RK: He always carried himself as if he were the czar of all the Russians, you know?

SP: He's a big man, in a long overcoat.

RK: Right. When he walked down the street, you knew that somebody of stature was walking down the street.

SP: He had a distinguished family in Armenia and that bearing never left him.

RK: At any rate, there was a considerable amount of rivalry--put it that way.

SP: Already, in '45?

RK: No, before that. People like David Smith was making a little bit of a name among artists. I mean, maybe there were only a hundred artists in New York, in total, and ten of them that really counted, but they knew what was going on. There were like five galleries! There was Curt Valentine, and Rose Freid, and--one or two other little galleries.

SP: And Matisse? KADISH -- but you couldn't even begin to talk about them, because he only showed European stuff. But Curt Valentin was open to having not only the emigrant artists, but also American artists like David Smith, you know? Showed them.

SP: Marian Willard, I think.

RK: Yes, Marian Willard had a gallery; there were a few others. But the main gist of my activity at that particular time, '45-'46, was to find a place to live, and unfortunately I couldn't find a place to live in New York, so I moved out to the country, New Jersey, and lost and separated myself. I could have been living in Kansas. I think it was one of the really major mistakes in my life -- not that I didn't enjoy working with animals, I got a lot out of it.

SP: It was a dairy farm, right?

RK: It was a dairy farm, and I became a rather successful dairy farmer, and it said something to me that I think eventually put itself back into my work. And the day came when there was only one thing to do: either forget about being an artist, or else chuck the whole dairy business and rent the farm out. And that's what happened.

There was a public sale, the cows were sold, the machinery was sold, and that was it. And I began to teach.

SP: That was in the '50s when you sold the farm. When was it? '55?

RK: The teaching thing was pretty much a liberation. It gave me time and it gave me resources. I don't think too much of what it's done for American art, but it certainly did help the American artist to try to find a way in which survival could be considered in this world of ours that we have today. I see that [Robert] Hughes is very upset about what's happening. Do you read the New York Review of Books?

SP: Oh, Bob Hughes, yes.

RK: Do you know him at all?

SP: No, I don't know him personally. I can attest to what he says is happening, personally.

RK: He's a little bit upset -- can you imagine, he says we have 20,000 artists. I say we have 350, 00 artists. I'm generous. [POL laughs]

SP: Yes, it's completely different.

RK: I mean, can you imagine at this particular time -- there's one thing I don't like, and that is that he lays a couple of broadsides into Mapplethorpe, you know. Now, I don't think that he should do that, because all you're doing is giving the enemy ammunition. Let's face it, he wasn't the world's worst photographer, you know. Some of his portraits of fellow artist I think are pretty damn good in photography. But if you're going to start attacking and lampooning somebody, put it where it counts, where it's going to mean something for the rest of us as artists, you know. And starting in on the pornography bit, it's never done anything but open up a

SP: Well, it's a no-win situation.

RK: It is a win situation, for the Baptists, it is a win situation, you know. Let's not talk about AIDS because it is dirty and all of those dirty people that are getting AIDS they really deserve it, it's helping our side because it's wiping out the enemy. That kind of a statement. Man, if you've spent any time in the south, it's pretty depressing to think that this is what the great creative force can end up being. And it's almost all right if you do it in literature, you know. I mean, you can't do representations of it pictorially because Southern literature is just chock full all the way -- you know, [William] Faulkner, where the guy is using the ear of corn as a sexual organ. And you read those, they're marvelous writers, they're terrific writers, and they build some images that could be very corrupting if you let them get away with them. And they exist, they take place. You know it's part of our culture, that it does exist. I think to allow the enemy to take money away from, with all modesty, institutions like your institution, let's say, which I really don't believe in, but I really believe--you know, we're spending one-tenth, according to citing him, of what the French spend. I'd love to see a lousy piece of sculpture on every street corner in New York. Can you imagine how wonderful it would be? Can you imagine?

SP: We need a lot to do. I think it will be cut but not until after the election. It can still be a political hot potato--the idea of censorship, and the NEA and everything else.

RK: I mean, our whole attitude has become so negative that we've become "acceptable," I mean, we begin to accept that kind of the nature of things. I remember during the early days of the WPA when there was a question as to whether there should be an art project or not, and there was a guy by the name of Maury Maverick. Did you ever hear of him? He was a Representative from Texas with the right name, a Maverick you know. And he got up in the House of Representatives and the title of his speech was, "Artists Must Eat: Who Will Say Me Nay?" And he gave this little speech on why there should be an art project. Now the kind of art that he believed in, the kind of art that I believe in could have been miles and miles apart. And I would even have conceded that we have the kind of art that he believes in rather than no art support at all, you know? Something is bound to happen, something can happen, even if the thing that you support is fully and completely against what you believe in in principle. But we're spending so little money, you know, we have a budget in an art school of \$30 million and \$25 million will go into the lighting fixtures and the dorms and into what kind of mopwater to use and that kind of crap, rather than what has really something to do with what makes an artist. It's annoying that we've lost track of what really does make an artist. And I think one of the things that does make an artist is having artists come in contact with individuals who are actively producing works. Maybe there should not be any classes at all. Maybe --

SP: The old apprenticeship system?

RK: Yes.

SP: That's an idea.

RK: Well, it's more than an idea, it's worked before, why shouldn't it work again? Well, at any rate I came back to New York. I've been here at this place for 30-odd years. I've been teaching intermittently, first in Newark and then at the Brooklyn Museum.

SP: Your work became mythic after the War. I mean, when you stopped a bit your work was very interpretive. Your war art, as I said was very interpretive to begin with, but then in the 50s you returned to work and it was very mythic. Why? Why did you decide to use myth? Obviously it seemed to be kind of relevant to what you wanted to say.

RK: Well, you can't have the impact of the horrendousness of the kind of death that the world had seen without asking yourself some questions as to where we came from and where do we think we're going, and who's your mother and who's your father, and who do you think you can choose to find in this world of ours -- a mother and a father somewhere in space and in time and is more gratifyingly going to give us answers? I believe that much of my work was done on impulse, because I felt that this was a feeling that I couldn't put my finger on, and I impulsively would allow a piece of clay to go in a certain direction -- I intentionally used clay because it was God's way of making the creatures on this world. In almost every society you had to have clay before you could even have a blade of grass to grow or a tree to grow.

SP: That's an elemental material. Fundamental.

RK: It's a material that most peoples have chosen to be the material charged with lightning bolts of energy. Bringing life into what is or was seemingly inanimate suddenly becomes animate. You know, Dore Ashton was here the other day. She asked me once if anybody has ever written anything that satisfies me as far as my work is concerned. Naturally I hemmed and hawed [POL laughs heartily] and then just yesterday I got in the mail the piece that she has just written. I'm going to have to write her and say that she has perhaps partially touched on, in words, at least in its outer fringes, and what I've been trying to say is something that cannot be said in words. And I think that when one becomes descriptive in words -- I mean, if my work has become mythic, it isn't because I'm a storyteller. I think that there are plenty of storytellers -- for instance, in all religions; and when we read the ones that seem to be most gratifying in the religions, they're the ones that we least understand. They're the ones that have more poetic elements in them, that carry out more than just the fringe of what a mother figure is all about. I don't know whether or not you've killed many animals and I don't know whether you've ever participated in the birth of any animals or not, but you know when you've got a pig and she's beginning to discharge these piglets, each one of them in a little sac, and you make sure you clean the thing off and she starts eating up those little sacs, and all of a sudden you've got a thing that's life in your hands and you put it on the mother pig; and you know that you came into the world in very much the same way [END OF THIS SIDE, A] BEGINNING SIDE B

RK: I have a friend that's now working at the Museum of Natural History, Jenny Lee. Do you know her work at all? [POL says no] She's a very good sculptor. And you know sculpture isn't selling these days, you want other work. She's working with material that's hundreds of million years old. Now, she's making the framework out of steel and rods to support it all so it's going to be put on exhibition on a weekend perhaps in the next three or four million years that we may still exist on this earth maybe we won't even have a good view of what life was all about. You know, when you think about how fragile life is and when you think about how accidentally it all came into being, there are two theories. One, of course, is that there is a maker and the other is that the whole thing is just a sheer idiotic stupid accident. And if it is a sheer idiotic stupid accident, then it's one of the most ungodly ones that has ever taken place. That you and I are sitting here talking with a thing like this that is really reaching into the very depths of what the universe is all about, and when you get right down to it, what are you going to work with? You're going to make representations of the pretty things in life?

SP: The surface of things? No, it's not compelling, and it must have struck you, especially after the Second World War, that you couldn't possibly do that after that experience. But I think you were a rather philosophic painter in the beginning, in the 30s. Your murals had large questions to them, as we spoke about earlier. I think your work is very probing in this way. The generation that came after you didn't have it. Pop Art didn't have that, and of course Minimal didn't have that type of thing that seemed to be our generation of men and women. Parts of it have returned but not a great deal. I think it's one of the things I like about your work a great deal. Jackson must have shared this too and your entire generation. Did Charles?

RK: Yes, Charles did too. But you know we would go out clamming together, or he caught his first fish. Now, he was a westerner, he'd gone hunting, he knew what life was all about, but I remember once we were out clamming together -- this is Jackson -- and somewhere along the line there weren't any clams and we went on a little further and went fishing. And we started to catch blowfish. And you know the phenomenon of that thing blowing itself up -- there's a tiny little piece on top that's extremely tasty -- I thought he was going to jump out of the boat. He started jumping up and down as if a fish was blowing itself up, you know.

SP: He was startled, or was he frightened?

RK: He was startled, he was absolutely startled that a form of life should take on that kind of pain. Of course, it was something that you have to not enjoy, you have to see through it since this is a way in which you're making your own food. He loved to eat and he loved to eat meat and he loved to eat fish; he loved to eat those things. So there was never a time at which he would ever say, "I'm not going to go fishing because this precious little animal shouldn't be killed." He loved venison, for instance

SP: No, he wasn't a vegetarian like we have today.

RK: No. What's more marvelous than a piece of venison? Or what's more marvelous to look at than to see a deer take a four-foot fence from standing still? I think they both can be appreciated. That's what I say -- when a basketball player, when a real peak baseball player hits a homerun and he doesn't start running, he knows it's a homerun, and you can see by his stance and everything about him that he's reached that peak of perfection, in the movement of his body-- it's something -- don't you enjoy it? [exuberantly] I enjoy it, it's something marvelous, you know.

SP: I especially like hockey, ice hockey players.

RK: Well, unfortunately, if you want to be a pop artist and then enjoy the way the label is pasted on a can, I think that's fine. One of the most marvelous things about the Impressionists is the way in which they opened our eyes to a walk through the woods, or smelling an apple or a peach. I think it wasn't just a matter of a still life, but then with somebody like Cezanne, being the museum painter that he was, those things become altars, those still lifes, and ... the landscapes, they're not just plain ordinary landscapes. And with Matisse they're really great moments of joy, great moments of pleasure.

SP: No, I think the artists that we admire the most are those that imbue their work with something beyond the surface. There's no question, those who deal perhaps with ultimate questions are those that we view -- you have an Oceanic shield here behind you. Probably the same thing. When did you acquire this?

RK: My brother and sister-in-law brought that back from the South Pacific. They ... some years ago. [They move away from recorder, evidently looking at objects.] [Returning] Now, you can't handle something like this or view something like this without knowing that this is a fellow human being, you know? And it isn't only that it's the bone but it's the way in which they've taken both western and -- you know, this is a strictly western piece of sweater, knit, and with rope, with string.

SP: You must have seen all of these shows in New York in the 40s -- the Indian art show in '41, the Oceanic show at MOMA in '46. Did you go with Jackson to these?

RK: We were avid, avid gallery and museum goers. And I mean avid. There was plenty to see, so you could go one day a week, and if there was a day in which there was nothing to see, you could always go to the Museum of Natural History, and he loved the Northwest; we all did. The South Pacific. Of course there, they were considered to be "ethnographic," they had nothing to do with art. But we went there to look at them because they were so exciting. Now they can hide behind the skirts of "art."

SP: There were a whole slew in MOMA at that time .

RK: Yes.

SP: In the late 30s and in the 40s.

RK: It was amazing that the South Pacific had very, very little influence on the contemporary scene.

SP: But everybody liked the '46 show.

RK: Everyone liked it but it had very little influence. You know, I must say the impact of African tribal art on the French now, it was thought that possibly that South Pacific show, all of a sudden we were going to see something that really began to be -- mostly crafts people began to respond to it. I wouldn't say that's so today, today it's another thing altogether; I think it actually opened our eyes up for a lot of the graffiti art, in a funny kind of way.

SP: Keith Haring.

RK: Yes. Maybe it has, maybe it hasn't. Leave that to the art historians.

SP: Were you interested in [inaudible] Surrealism in the '40s?

RK: Oh yes, very definitely. Julien Levy Gallery would be a gallery that was thoroughly explored and investigated, and the fact that Peggy Guggenheim had had a relationship with Max Ernst and the fact being that

among the earliest paintings that affected me were some Max Ernst The collages, for instance, that he did, even the collages that Kurt Schwitters did, in a sense had a very Surreal quality about them. [Joseph] Cornell was very popular, you know. It may have been a game that he was playing, having fun, but [Juan] Miro was extremely popular among artists at that time. [Salvador] Dali kind of played himself out, Dali sort of shot his wad.

SP: By the 40s now?

RK: Yes. And he wasn't -- well, no doubt he was a great talent. And then there was an interest began to develop in Gonzalez, the sculptor, and a few other people like that.

SP: Did you ever have a chance to exhibit your wall works after the War? Things you did for the Army and Life at all?

RK: No.

SP: There weren't sort of after the war exhibits?

RK: No.

SP: I'll have to send you a catalogue of the show .

RK: Yes, you said you were going to.

SP: There's a reproduction of one of your things in that.

RK: Which outfit was it?

SP: The Army Art Center. It was in Pottsdam .

RK: How many catalogues did they print?

SP: They did 500.

RK: You can send me one?

SP: Oh yes, absolutely. I'm sorry I didn't bring it today, I meant to.

RK: Believe it or not -- I don't know if I could find it right away quick -- but they were reproduced in a Chinese art magazine.

SP: After the War or during the War?

RK: After the War, just recently. You know, I get some very weird things and I don't pay any attention to, I just stick them in a cabinet somewhere. I had a letter and a magazine from Hungary about 10, 12 years ago, that Reuben Kadish of New York has been one of the most important influences. He had this wall -- it must have been 10 by 50 feet ... huge wall that he was doing in the interior of a public building; all sorts of images going on.... You never know, you know -- here's this guy working away somewhere in Hungary, very good technician, good craftsman, doing a wall that was a sculptural wall. I was very pleased, and this thing comes in the mail. I never wrote him back, I wish I had; maybe he would have invited me for the revolution. You know, you often wonder about -- Jimmy Ernst told me that when he went to the Soviet Union-- the State Department sent them-- there were some people in the State Department that sent books along, you know, like Cezanne, things like that, and Cubism. And when they came to the Soviet Union, they were completely ignorant of what had been going on in the western world -- in the outlying communities, not in Moscow. And he said one of the artists said, "Here's a book of our work" and it was the official Stalinist art. And then he said, [Kadish whispers] "Look on page 56" and he opened it up to 56 and there was a Cubist drawing in there. [POL laughs heartily] A very bad one, he said, but it was to show that they knew something about what was going on.

SP: Now, it's completely different again, of course.

RK: Well, I don't think that those things can come from the outside. I think that they have to come from the inside. Not that the outside can't have an impact, it always does have an impact; and if you take serious artists that have changed our vision, that have changed our way of seeing things and you begin to realize, like an artist like [Constantin] Brancusi from the time that he was a student and had all of these Roman portraits to assimilate and accumulate, and then early Christian art and Cycladic art, and you start going to [Auguste] Rodin and African art, and Indian art, of course, you begin to realize what a mishmash of influences, you know, that have to filter through this one person. And you have culture like that, too. And I think our group of people that were working here in the New York area likewise were quite a mishmash. You can't exactly say that we were just a bunch of

ignorant hicks, because we went to museums, we went to libraries, we went to shows. In Los Angeles, a small group of us, but we were as familiar with what was going on in Paris as New Yorkers were.

SP: It's always been noted how aware you were as a group, and how open. Because Europeans had their conflicts but the Americans were sort of much more open to things.

RK: Right.

SP: Did you know much about Indian lore and ritual and things like that, the way Jackson, I think, did, and others, in the West?

RK: Yes, sure, of course, I mean there was a mutual interest. We went to the Southwest Museum [in Los Angeles] -- as a matter of fact, Phil and I had a little studio on Museum Drive, which was a mile or mile and a half up from the Museum. And we went to the Los Angeles County Museum. You'd have to get down on your hands and knees in order to see anything in the bottoms of the cases but

SP: Well, you learned a great deal.

RK: And there are things that I have had all my life long. I don't have them here, I have them up in the country. Kachina dolls, for instance: the first one I got when I was 18. Hopi Indian face pots: so I've had them all my life.

SP: So you collected on your trips, also L.A.?

RK: Very few things, very few. I was never a collector but there were always some things I did pick up.

SP: What did you read? Do you remember reading at that time -- anthropologists: [Ruth] Benedict, or maybe Margaret Mead?

RK: Well, we read Franz Boas, we read Margaret Mead; we were literary snobs .

SP: Fraser's *The Golden Bough* for example?

RK: The *Golden Bough* yes, we were literary snobs. We would read [Marcel] Proust, we would read [Andre] Gide, we would read [James] Joyce, of course. We wouldn't read the Americans, you know. Like Sherwood Anderson. I wouldn't read Joseph Conrad come hell or high water, and once about 20-odd years ago I was stuck somewhere and didn't have a book to read and I went to the corner drugstore and I found a Joseph Conrad and I started to read it and I said, "Wow! This guy is great. This guy's terrific, you know?!" And it was because, you know, who would read Conrad? Kids would read Conrad for a little excitement. And then I proceeded to read everything I could get my hands on that Conrad wrote. I would read his friend, Ford Madox Ford, but never once read Conrad just because they happened to be friends.

SP: Did you read Campbell at some time?

RK: Well, Campbell is a Johnny-come-lately, relatively. After all --of course I read him, sure.

SP: And Jackson too? Jackson is known also not as a reader but he was familiar with them.

RK: He was familiar. He listened to all of the discussions that would be going on, and one of the people that would be constantly talking would be Harold Rosenberg. And when Harold would start talking, everybody would be quiet and listen.. He had a way about him..

SP: That might have been later -- was that the 50s or the 40s?

RK: Yes.

SP: How about Herbert Read?

RK: That was later. Now, of course everyone was very familiar with "Clem" Greenberg. But during the 30s I would say we were very well informed as to what was going on. There were little magazines that were out all the time, like *The Tiger's Eye* .

SP: *The Triple V* .

RK: There were all sorts of little things going on.

SP: Did you read *Partisan Review*?

RK: Oh absolutely, yes.

SP: Well, it was a very literate group you were, and liked literacy. It wasn't that you were putting it down, you liked being literate there. I'm not sure that's true today.

RK: Well, now we have [Gabriel Garcia] Marquez to read, now we have [Mario Vargas] Lhosa to read, and a few Europeans.

SP: One question always asked, I'm just asking this, did you really know a great deal about automatism? Did you really rely on it in any way?

RK: No.

SP: Do you think Jackson did?

RK: I think it is something that came to him. I think if he were a participant, it was in his own way that he was, but I think it was something that was brought to him, to his attention, afterwards, personally. Every artist is carried away by when the work takes over, and when that happens, it's pretty exhilarating. I can tell you one thing that he rarely, if ever, worked when he was drunk. When he drank, he drank, and when he worked, he worked. That was one of the things I can truthfully say. His drinking was a full-time job when it took place, that was his prime performance occupation.

SP: Well, you know the recent biography, the projections of Jackson's work is sort of the result of his, if you will, emotional disturbance, but strictly a result of his emotional disturbance. It sort of denies the fact that he was an artist, that he was a thinking, feeling human being. Jackson was literate and intelligent and he had something to say. You two must have had a nice relationship for years.

RK: When we went to see a show and he had something to say about the show, either during the show or after the show, it wouldn't be something that I wouldn't listen to. I mean, I had respect for what he had to say and he often said things that were pretty cogent.

SP: You mentioned a letter when we spoke previously that he sent to you, talking about his poured paintings as "images." You've lost this letter. Do you remember the contents?

RK: Well, I wish to God I'd had some of those letters, I don't know what the hell happened to them. I have some letters that I'm going to go through now with Herman Cherry has died. Do you want his letters?

SP: Yes, please.

RK: I don't want to give them to you now, you've got enough to carry, but some day when I'm going by there I'll get them and bring them up to Archives and copy them at least. There's one there that's a nice kind of documentation about George Biddle and Benton going to Washington to have a conference with somebody and they're thinking about assigning projects and they want to include artists. So a historical point of view, maybe it ought to be a part of the Archives.

SP: Yes, Biddle and the idea of the beginning of WPA ,yes. Benton was involved with that, too.

RK: Well, Benton was involved as a consultant, more or less. Benton was a "bad boy," nobody really wanted to have anything to do with Benton [laughing]. You never knew when he was going to turn around

SP: And bite your head off!

RK: Rightfully, rightfully! And you know, let's get down too it. You want to respect Reginald Marsh, he's an accomplished artist, he could draw, he had training in the tradition, and he played around with images, that you could see on 42nd Street or at the beach, and so on, but he did have a respectful, admiring group of people that would never take away from him the fact that he was accomplished. But what are you going to say about George Biddle? Hmph? Is he of the same stature?

SP: No, I don't think so.

RK: No. And yet Biddle stood in a position where he could have an influence.

SP: He was also partly responsible for the Army Art.

RK: Yes, yes. I'm saying, one has to respect that. But you can't respect him as an artist.

SP: As a creative artist.

RK: No. I mean, I've got a lot of respect for artists that have made significant major statements. And the range

is tremendous, it could be Audubon, for instance. You take a look at an original Audubon and, you know, you've got to take your hat off to the guy. I wouldn't mind having one hanging, you know. But look at an Arnold Blanch, what the hell is that? It's nothing. Or Maurice Stern [phon.sp.]. The other day I saw a Maurice Stern; it's shameful to think that this is a major statement in American art.

SP: Maybe more at one time, less now.

RK: [emphatically] When? When?? How could we have been so blinded, you know?

SP: I might say the same thing about scholarship. [he laughs]

RK: Maybe you could! But mind you, this is after Gauguin. And who are they trying to kid?

SP: The world's a strange place .

RK: It sure is.

SP: And what is successful is mind boggling at certain times. And what takes years to be recognized is phenomenal, too.

RK: One of the reasons that I think that not only should Benton be respected for his accomplishments as an artist but he should be respected for his having inspired so many individual younger painters. I mean, you take a guy like Benton, Herman Cherry, who just passed away, Charles Pollock, Jackson Pollock, Phil Guston, myself -- probably if I reached out I could probably find a few others. Now, there was a lot of energy that has come out from somebody like that that has made something, and I think it's to be respected. Now, I know that we are a long ways from anything that the French tradition has given us, and I know that if we hadn't been sensitized to the fact that there was this other thing on the other side of the ocean -- and at first Benton wasn't ashamed of the fact, you know, that there was some damn good painting that had gone on over there; he'd like to see something equal to it going on over here.

SP: Oh yes, he had a tremendous respect. He also taught with African sculpture in his classes too. There's a caricature of Benton and then there's the real Benton. The real Benton is actually quite a sophisticated guy.

RK: Very sophisticated.

SP: Even though he was playing the sort of rural hick at times; he really wasn't that in a lot of ways, he was really quite varied. I've written about his work, I think it's terrific. I wrote an article about his teaching at the Art Students League and how it must have affected Jackson. Rhythmic Analysis of form. Well, I sent the article to Charles Pollock, about ten years ago too, and Charles liked it quite a bit; in fact it was a well-received piece. But Benton's way of analyzing things with the Arts articles in 1926 --

RK: Really? The composition, the movement of the forms, of one form going into another?

SP: I used those to analyze Pollock's work, including into the abstraction. So, yes, there's no question.

RK: There's no question about it.

SP: All the way through--what you strip is the structure and that structure is very dynamic and was very strong. I don't know if Pollock saw the articles but he obviously must have got some of the material from Benton when he was with him.

RK: Well, I think Jackson did some copies at one point I remember. Was it Tintoretto or Michelangelo?

SP: Oh yes, he was always analyzing.

RK: That was because of Benton.

SP: It's interesting. Today, they make this argument about the politics, Siqueiros is the Communist and Benton's the Right-winger in the 30s, but that doesn't seem to have bothered you at all, the political.

RK: I read The New Masses and when I would see a book that was panned in The New Masses, I'd go out and buy it. [POL laughs heartily]

SP: Really?

RK: Yes.

SP: That's interesting. Jackson went. He worked, of course, with Siqueiros, and he worked with Benton and

yourself, you're friendly with him. You didn't see these people as terribly opposite, they shouldn't be in each others' camps and knowing who's in one camp [voices overlapping]

RK: That's one of the things that I held against Lawrence Fidelson [phon sp.], that he went on the radio and he started in with William Randolph Hearst's "Abstract art is Communist art." Imagine!

SP: That stuff. Imagine an artist --

RK: Yeah, right. This is a sophisticated guy jumping on that William Randolph Hearst bandwagon, that "abstract art is Communist art." Hitler's point of view exactly. And Benton said one day, I remember this so clearly because I was a great admirer of Stuart Davis -- he said, "I don't understand how somebody as intelligent as Stuart Davis could be so dumb as to be an abstract painter." [POL laughs heartily] I mean, it was really kind of funny! You didn't dare burst out laughing but -- and he was quite serious.

SP: Those two didn't get along, there was a lot of personal antipathy, like real energy between them.

RK: No. You had a respect for his intelligence but that he should be so damn dumb as to be an abstract painter.

SP: Fascinating times, I have to say. Fascinating people.

RK: Well, there were fascinating times, they were fascinating in the sense that -- I know one thing, and that is, we had a feeling for big -- if there's anything that we inherited from the French, it was for the idea that there was great art and that the great art could come from anywhere; it didn't have to come from the Academy, you know? That great art could come from, like, from Van Gogh, from a shoemaker's son, it could come from a tailor's son, it could come from a banker's son, you know. And that was one of the things that I think the French taught us, in a funny kind of way. And that you could make it yourself, you didn't have to wait to have the approval of some official authority; a diploma, the likes of which -- and I think that was also part of the renaissance that we got out of being around Benton and being around Siqueiros and those kind of guys. And now today, a young artist turns to me and he says, "Oh, you don't have to tell me about that, I have three degrees." As if that's so damned important; he's got his Master's from Yale and his other two degrees from NYU; Bachelor of Fine Arts, Master of Fine Arts, then History or something or other.

SP: Well, there's people who know less than they think they know, and people who know more than they think they know.

RK: It's interesting that you wrote on those Benton compositions. I still have those Arts magazine articles. There are few magazines that I've hung onto and that was one of them.

SP: Well, they're brilliant. There are a number of ideas, I think, ultimately got filtered into Jackson's work and any number of other things. You can see why your interest in dynamism, as you said very early in the conversation, in vital design that you would be attracted to those articles. Those things are real descriptions, they're not descriptions, they're real analysis of that. Those were in the 20s .

RK: Well, if you grow up in southern California in the 20s and in the early 30s and you would go to an exhibition of the California Watercolor Society [POL laughs heartily] and had just come from the Huntington Library where you'd seen some Blakes

SP: Blue Boy.

RK: No! Seen some Blake -- after all, we didn't go to see the Blue Boy; they were more than just watercolors, of course. I don't know whether the accumulation of all that dullness

SP: Well, you got beyond that. When you look around this room with all these tremendous drawings and sculpture, the force itself has nothing to do with any of those things. Really protean. Well, I think I've exhausted you enough. Why don't we end here?

RK: Okay.

SP: Let me put the date. This is April 15, 1992. [beginning next segment]

RK: It opens up a road for him [speaking of Jackson Pollock -- see later allusion here to "Lee"] that from that painting on, there's something that opened up, a vision opened up, that there is a tremendous amount of intensification of images that began to elucidate and manifest themselves from that one particular painting.

SP: Burning Landscape. Did he express this to you, or --?

RK: Yes, yes --

SP: Would you really consider that a breakthrough work for him?

RK: Yes.

SP: Well! I don't think that's recognized.

RK: And I wanted to buy that painting, and he wouldn't sell it because of that.

SP: Aha!

RK: He said "no, that's one of the most important paintings that --" he hung onto a lot of stuff that Lee [Krasner] subsequently sold that went to museums.

SP: Yes, that painting 's in Yale now.

SP: Yes, it is.

SP: It's an explosive work and it has this forcefulness, not finished images at all.

RK: It was a very important work for him. You know, I have a few things to say when we get to the proper place. That Guston that's on the wall behind here, this clay sculpture. You see that portrait of that girl? That was done in -- and then behind you is a portrait of my father that I painted and that's after I'd been working for Siqueiros.

SP: What a powerful -- a lot of rhythm.

RK: And I'd like to place those two paintings somewhere. And I have a piece of sculpture of Jackson Pollock's -- a bronze, a small head. I don't know if it's in the catalogue raisonnee or not. They acted like such snobs that at a certain point I didn't want to have anything to do with any of those guys.

SP: A small portrait by Jackson. He wanted to be a sculptor, of course in the beginning.

RK: Right.

SP: And he did some work in the 30s.

RK: Right and I cast his bronze--it was cast in the edition, the idea being that like the edition of silkscreen things, to pay for the education of Sandy's kids. And the head -- well, it's a complicated thing. I don't want to give it away. My wife is in a nursing home and I'm going to run out of money and I'm going to have to put her on Medicaid. And then, I'm told, the government walks in and picks up all your stuff and throws it out in the street for auction. So I don't know how those things work or not, but --

SP: You have to be pretty much destitute. They take everything if they are going to put you on Medicaid. If you have a house they may sell it or something like that. They really do a number when they take over supporting you like that. I had a family member in that situation. Basically they take everything in the bank account. It was a private nursing home, they'd take all the money then Medicaid took over.

RK: If the work is given to a tax-free tax-supported institution, I understand they don't charge you; that's against us.

SP: I don't see why. [END OF TAPE]