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Oral history interview with Tony Vevers,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Tony Vevers on September 1, 1965. The interview was conducted in Provincetown, Massachusetts by Dorothy Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing Tony Vevers in Provincetown on September 1, 1965. Tony, I think the best thing, as we were discussing it a moment ago, is just to go ahead and discuss first of all a little bit about your early years, where you were born, what your childhood was like, how you became an artist.

TONY VEVERS: Well, I was born in England in 1926 and grew up there mostly in the country and came over to America in 1940. The blitz was on.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How old were you then?

TONY VEVERS: Fourteen. And at that time I wasn't painting. I wasn't really involved with painting. But now I realize that many of the things that happened as a child in England led me to be a painter.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What kind of things were they?

TONY VEVERS: Well, I guess the first was a few short of Wordsworthian experience, you know. Like as a very small child coming out into the country and - they have this thing in England, a sort of frost that just covers everything with this sort of shimmering, crystalline kind of light. It's very sort of static. You don't get it over here very often. In England we have this very heavy sort of precipitation, this heavy dew and it freezes and everything is covered with this frost. And I remember very vividly as a small child going out and seeing a spider's web and all the little shrubs and weeds and so on covered with this frost. It was very impressive and it happened to me sometimes, you know, you get sort of enraptured with nature.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Tony, what kind of family did you have?

TONY VEVERS: My father was Director of the London Zoo. So I grew up in a zoo kind of in Bedfordshire. And I used to go to school in London, a special school in Hampstead.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When you were a young child?

TONY VEVERS: Yes, from eight through fourteen years old.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you have a large family - other brothers and sisters?

TONY VEVERS: No, just my sister and myself; and older half-brothers and half-sisters. And I was very interested in birds. And radios; I used to make radios. But actually I think looking back what I was really involved in with the radios was making them, you know, like sculpture and drawing circuit diagrams. I was always drawing circuit diagrams. Although I didn't do much artwork in school what little I did I was very involved with. This, plus sort of, you know the experience you have feeling nature, sort of like having an instantaneous reaction just like Wordsworth, you know, this poem, you know, the child and all that. I felt very much that, I think it's very true. England is too much of a poet's country for a painter, I think. And the landscape is too worked over. And I remember coming over here and feeling immediately very much rapport with the countryside.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You did?

TONY VEVERS: Yes, very interestingly, because it's so much more open, so unformed in a way. And I was very excited by it. The first summer I spent here it was very hot and sultry in Connecticut and I had a very, very distinct rapport and identification with this sort of lush.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You didn't feel homesickness for the green and park-like things?

TONY VEVERS: No. As soon as I got here I felt at home.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's marvelous. Before we leave, however, when you were young and, you know, seeing things in nature, nevertheless we often see in nature things that we have also seen in art. What kind of pictures would you have seen? I mean I'm not talking about just pictures in museums but, you know, things you might have seen in publications and so on. What kind of imagery?

TONY VEVERS: Well, we always had pictures around the house. We had a very good reproduction of Vermeer's *Head of A Young Woman*, you know, with that thing around her head.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Beautiful, yes.

TONY VEVERS: And my father had a few paintings by John Massey's brother Paul – or the other way around – I don't know which.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Paul's brother.

TONY VEVERS: Paul's brother John, yes. Right. And you know, we were sort of involved. And we always had paintings around the house. And I remember once I think when I was about ten years old hearing about Van Gogh and being terribly impressed by it, the story of Van Gogh.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But you hadn't seen any paintings by him?

TONY VEVERS: No. I don't believe I'd ever seen any. I know most times I used to go to the British Museum of Natural History or something to look at dinosaurs. I was always very interested in drawing them. I think coming over here was the thing that started me off. And I think it's true – and I'd be interested one day to make a study of how many painters that came here from Europe. You know, you think of Jan Mueller, Jack Tworkov, Rothko, Hofmann, you know, I think at least fifty percent of the painters in this country are immigrants. And I think some of this has a lot to do with the impact of coming here from Europe. There's something stimulating, there's something unique very definitely.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I'm sort of surprised it wasn't a bit frightening, however, such a violent country, so unfinished, you know. In England all the little edges of lawns are all sort of tidied up with hedges and so on.

TONY VEVERS: Yes. Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And here everything is sprawling. Lots of waste.

TONY VEVERS: I liked that very much when I first came here.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The feeling of what? What kind of felling? Do you remember, you know, articulating ...?

TONY VEVERS: The feeling of space, you know. The vastness.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, lots of space.

TONY VEVERS: What you have, you know, country to use here. Nothing is as contained.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, that's very...

TONY VEVERS: I still feel that very much. I spent two years in Italy painting and I realized after a while, you know, every time you turn around there's a castle in just the right place on top of a hill and so it's already done before you start. You can't paint a picture that's been done like by Uccello or Massaccio. It's already done. It's been formed I think this is one of the reasons for this explosion of art in this country is this very definite sort in inchoate almost landscape maybe. And of course, the Pop artists feel this in terms, I think, of the nutty kind of urban landscape we have.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's a very good point. Well, when you first came here you were how old, Tony?

TONY VEVERS: Fourteen.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you with your family when you came?

TONY VEVERS: No, I came here with my sister. My mother died in 1939. And my father was sick and very involved with work. And so these friends of ours invited us to come over here for the duration. And we did. And the first two years I sort of fumbled around in High School in Connecticut. And I got a scholarship to go to Hotchkiss. And I had been there about a year. And they had a very good thing there. They had a sort of studio. Anybody who wanted to could take out paint and canvas and brushes and go out and paint. One day this guy said, "Come on out and we'll do some painting." And I had been sort of fooling around. I had just read *Lust For Life*, that nutty Van Gogh thing. So I went out and did a landscape, a fall landscape. And after that everything I saw was in terms of paint. It was a very strange experience. Because about a week afterwards everything I saw in landscape and so on was just in terms of paint strokes. And after that I just painted all the time. Every second I could get.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Pretty much in the manner of Van Gogh or...?

TONY VEVERS: No. No. Sort of kind of impressionist I guess.

DOROTHY SECKLER: More or less leading into this stage – the painting behind us here?

TONY VEVERS: All the paintings that I did when I was very young at that time were like what I'm sort of doing now in a way. The second year I was there I started using figures in an imaginative way. They sort of relate in a rather naïve way or primitive way to what I'm doing now. I mean in a way when I look at my early things they have a certain connection.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What did you see in the way of art over here? I mean in addition to what you saw in nature?

TONY VEVERS: Well, as soon as I got interested I used to go to New York all the time. All you used to see then was – well, a few Picasso's – this was during the war.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You're speaking now of galleries and museums?

TONY VEVERS: Yes. I used to send off to the Museum of Modern Art and get illustrated booklets and stuff. Of course, I used to go to New York and all you could see then, of course, in 1943-1944 were a few Picasso's and A.C.A. and, you know, social realism sort of thing of the 30's and 40's.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's right. So then you weren't influenced, of course, by the social realism, I take it?

TONY VEVERS: Well, I used to look at those paintings of John Stuart Curry and I really didn't like him. They were sort of being pushed as a great American paintings at the time, you know. And I really sort of had a strange feeling. I didn't really like them and I thought I should like them. I was very insecure about the whole thing. And this lasted for a long time I think until finally I went to college. And then, you know, I used to go down to see the Betty Parsons shows and so on and whenever something else was going on. Matisse was showing at the Matisse Gallery. I did these things at Hotchkiss. And I went right into the Army. I didn't do much there, of course.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How long were you in the Army? You mean the American Army?

TONY VEVERS: I was in the American Army. I was naturalized then. Three years 1944 to 1946.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Where did your service take you?

TONY VEVERS: I was most of the time in Bavaria. It was a very interesting experience. I did photography there and I did some drawing, not very much. But I felt sort of committed as an artist at the time. And I came back. And I went to Yale on the G.I. Bill. I also floundered around the first couple of years. Then when the time came to choose a major I chose painting and drawing. Took all my courses, as many as I could get, in the Art School and in the Art History Department. And also in English.

DOROTHY SECKLER: While you were at Yale who was teaching there?

TONY VEVERS: Dean Keller.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It was rather academic?

TONY VEVERS: It was very academic, it was very Beaux-Arts. The first semester you drew from casts. And then you went to life drawing for a couple of years and you had a head painting and you had figure painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. I just wanted to make sure it was the pre-Albers period.

TONY VEVERS: It was pre-Albers, yes. I graduated the year before Albers got there.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I see.

TONY VEVERS: I was kind of glad. Because I got a very good background in very basic stuff. It has stood me in good stead.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's interesting.

TONY VEVERS: Also I think it's very good to give you something to revolt against. If you had been in the Albers situation you have it sort of handed as a dogma and you have nothing to work for for yourself. And I felt very definitely when I got out – I wasn't happy with what I had done in school – but you have the tools. And I was lucky enough when I was twenty-one I inherited about ten thousand bucks from my mother's estate. And I went to Italy. And there again I was very lucky because I somehow thought about going to Italy because I saw the

Italian Show they had at the Museum, I think it was 1949, which was kind of impressive. It wasn't great but it was sort of interesting stuff. And I went to Italy and studied with Rosaille briefly at the Academia in Florence. And was fortunate enough to meet people like Steve Pace and Larry Calcagno and Philip Schmidt, slightly older painters who were breaking into abstract expressionism. And we had a very good group there. We're still all good friends here.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Over in Florence.

TONY VEVERS: Yes. Whoever I met in Florence is still a very good friend. Everyone I can think of - Alvin.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's Alvin Ross?

TONY VEVERS: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What year was that now?

TONY VEVERS: That was 1950.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What kind of painting were you doing while you were in Italy then? Could you describe it a bit?

TONY VEVERS: I was sort of thrashing around doing all kinds of things. Nothing very much like I'm doing now. It was all so experimental. I did a lot of drawing. Most of the time I was drawing. Only in the last year -

DOROTHY SECKLER: Drawing what? Landscapes? Figures?

TONY VEVERS: Landscapes, figures, anything. I'd just try anything I could lay my hands on. And I did begin to feel the sort of thing about landscapes again. I made little drawing. Many, many of them. Cypress trees. And little landscapes. I used to draw a lot of things. Steve drew all the time. Everywhere we went we had sketchpads and we just drew constantly. And it was very good. And the second year I was there I had a studio and started painting and sort of got to where - to the kind of paint surface I'm doing now.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How old were you then, Tony?

TONY VEVERS: Twenty-three, twenty-four years old. And then I came back voluntarily. You know, I could have stayed a little longer but I wanted to come back. I thought I needed to paint here. And I landed in New York. And I immediately ran into Steve Pace again. Got introduced to the Cedar Bar atmosphere and the Club. And spent two or three years on that. We used to go to the Club. We used to go to the Cedar Bar. We used to go to the White House Tavern, you know.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What ideas that were being discussed at The Club made a particular impression on you?

TONY VEVERS: Well, practically none of them actually. But I worked very closely with Steve. He lived downstairs and I lived upstairs at 154 Delaney Street and I saw him almost every day. And he discussed his painting with me. And I was very influenced by abstract expressionism. I didn't paint like Steve very much but I understood what he was doing - and this new idea.

DOROTHY SECKLER: He was involved with abstract expressionism very deeply at that point.

TONY VEVERS: Yes, he was. The first day I got off the boat I came to see Steve and he showed me his new things. I felt I couldn't see them at all.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Really?

TONY VEVERS: But after about an hour I looked and I said this is really something... this idea like the things working like what they had been and it opened my eyes up to a great many things.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Although his work, of course, was very strong and energetic and abstract it was work that had a kind of starting point very often in landscape or in something -

TONY VEVERS: I think Steve always had a very lyrical feeling about nature.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

TONY VEVERS: And it always came into his work. And I've always looked at his paintings as sort of landscape paintings.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I have too. Well, so that you had a kind of comprehension of it and yet you weren't tempted

into it at all. Into that kind of way of painting?

TONY VEVERS: Well, I used to work with it, yes. I got interested in it by de Kooning that slash and swirl stuff.

DOROTHY SECKLER: To what extent does it come into your work at all. How does it...?

TONY VEVERS: I can show you some of the paintings. I've got one or two left that are sort of violent but they are still involved with nature. They're definitely landscapes. That's what I was involved in. And then I got married in 1953. And then I got involved in figure. You know, I think it's a very important point. We were talking earlier about how the wife is very important to a painter. I think this is very true. And being married I got very much involved with the figure. I used to draw my wife a lot. And about the spring of 1955 I started doing mostly figure work. And I felt like a renegade. And I never used to show it to anybody. Steve saw a few of them. He liked it very much. But apart from that I used to sort of feel kind of strange, you know.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mmhmm. Everybody else was doing abstract expressionism. Here you were...

TONY VEVERS: Yes. Well, it turned out that a lot of people were doing figures like Marshall Marcus, and I think Jan Mueller was breaking in to his figurative stage. But none of us knew each other very much then. It was all kind of not undercover but I felt different, you know.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How about the California group? Did you know about them at all?

TONY VEVERS: Well, I knew John Hultberg very well. And Cherry. And Grillo. But I didn't feel... And, of course, I used to see Diebenkorn's work, which I liked it very much but I never felt very influenced by them. I liked what they were doing but, you know, they were Californians. And still, who is kind of grandiose, you know, no one was quite sure of what he was doing. But one of the nice things then was you could sort of - there was such a wonderful community of artists. You know, nobody was sort of selling. If you were showing a little bit you could always get into a group show. And even a young person could feel involved with everybody in a nice way, it was honest and sweet. It's very different now, it seems to me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. And you were saying at that time if somebody sold they were almost suspect.

TONY VEVERS: Well, a little bit, yes, sure.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You thought they must be an operator or something because there was so little buying at that time of this avant-garde work.

TONY VEVERS: Yes, well, when Franz had his first show and de Kooning had a big show of *The Women* and stuff... just beginning to get... and such a history of not showing and not being accepted that you felt kind of out. But it was coming along so that the process of being "in" was so much simpler and it seemed to be more natural than it is now when it's all publicity and stuff, like that. So I think it was a wonderful time to be in New York. It was an exhilarating time to be in New York even if you weren't doing what everybody else was doing you felt there was camaraderie. It was just like being in the Army in that sense, you know... But I mean the art world is lost. It's too bad. It never could have lasted. And I am very pleased to have been part of it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When there would be discussions at The Club would you ever get up and defend your use of the figure or anything like that?

TONY VEVERS: No. I was just a tiny figure. I mean all these guys had been around there too long, you know. Resnick and everybody else were too verbal. And I never dared to... Half the time they wouldn't even let me in the door.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, you were sort of a sinner. Did he know that you were doing figurative work?

TONY VEVERS: No. No. No. I mean nobody would have cared if I had, you know. I had begun to show around and people knew who in was so it wasn't a very big thing. And I was much younger.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You're still in your twenties now?

TONY VEVERS: Yes, I was about twenty-five then. And I certainly wasn't about to stand up in The Club and - because I didn't know myself.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But you still had the courage to kind of keep going with the figure and not deviate into, you know...

TONY VEVERS: Well, I got very tired actually. The good people were good. But there were many bad people doing it. You saw the same colors and the same shapes and the same forms. I began to - really it was too much.

And we lived on Delaney Street and I used to have this thirst for nature. I used to, you know, walk up Third Avenue, take the elevated to about – I was working at 55th Street in the City Center Gallery – I'd take the elevated up to 60th Street, say, and I'd walk to Central Park and get ideas for paintings that way. And then we had an old car and we'd go to the country on weekends. All I painted was really reminiscences of the weekends and thoughts about Central Park. So in 1955 Elsa was pregnant. We had a chance to come up here. Through Milton Avery we got a house for the winter free.

DOROTHY SECKLER: "Up here" being Provincetown.

TONY VEVERS: Provincetown, yes. And so we left.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, you had become friends with a number of artists then including Milton Avery. Who else would have been your friends in New York at that time?

TONY VEVERS: Well, Steve Pace and Milton, and, oh, a whole host – John Cullen. We knew Franz.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Franz Kline? I want you to say it just for the record.

TONY VEVERS: Yes. And everybody else that was around The Club, you know. Well, I met Elsa at Monhegan. ... Nicla... was there. And Herbert Kallum. And that group.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you go to Monhegan?

TONY VEVERS: Yes, I spent a summer at Monhegan. That's where I met my wife. And that's where I started working on the watercolors.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was Elsa an art student? Or working?

TONY VEVERS: Yes, she had been an art student at the League. And we met there. I was working directly from nature and all this and started doing watercolors. And the watercolors led me back into the kind of surface I was using before when I was much younger. I started using this sort of dry wash kind of thing I'm doing now. It was a very good year. A very good summer. I got away from the sort of made-up stuff I'd been doing before, very impasto... sort of outside influence... New York. And I came up here and I started doing what I'm doing now more or less. And after that we spent about eight years up here, year around.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And this became – you built this house – I don't know whether you rented it or not – didn't you buy it at some point or make it your own? Or do something...?

TONY VEVERS: This house?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

TONY VEVERS: Well, this house we're in now I bought three years ago from Mark Rothko. This is the first summer we've really lived in it. We've been working on the place. Before that we rented around in Provincetown.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did Rothko live here before you?

TONY VEVERS: Yes, he lived here about one summer. Painted here. But he didn't feel too close to the town I think. I don't think he did much work here. After that he rented the place to Maurice Sievan. He never sort of really identified himself with Provincetown.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But he later did come back, of course?

TONY VEVERS: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, that's beside the point for my own digression. So here you were in Provincetown then. And you did have a show here in what – was it 1957?

TONY VEVERS: I think it was 1957 or 1958.

DOROTHY SECKLER: A beautiful show of the figurative paintings you'd been working on.

TONY VEVERS: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And rather in this manner, as I remember...

TONY VEVERS: That's one of the ones that was in the show. I'd like to make a digression too. I'd like to put on

the record that Yvonne Anderson now Koenig ran the Sun Gallery was instrumental – had the most important gallery up here certainly I think from 1955 to 1960 – she showed here Jan Mueller and Beacham, Lester Johnson, and many of the younger painters long before anybody else did. And, you know, it's a very exciting gallery. She's kind of the Betty Parsons of Provincetown. And she was very good. And I remember seeing her I think in about 1956. I said I'd like very much to have a show. She said, no, you're not ready yet. So about a year or two later she came by and said I could have a show. And it was a great show. And I sold about half the show out, I think.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I was lucky enough to have seen it and I thought it was a very beautiful show. And I remember many of the artists that I knew were saying, you know that Vevers is really a good artist and so on. They called my attention to you at that time.

TONY VEVERS: That's good. I didn't know that. And after that – since that, you know, we've had ups and downs but she has done very well for us I think. And I've changed around a lot. I used to paint dark paintings, sort of winter paintings. I realized I guess around 1960 that they were getting too much of one type and I deliberately went into more coloristic paintings, using more color.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, they were very light and luminous paintings at this period in the 50's. I mean they were very luminous and there was lots of white.

TONY VEVERS: Yes, but they were rather monochromatic and I felt that I wanted to use more color. So I went out and bought a whole bunch of color and started using it. And worked that way for several years. And now I feel over that. I feel differently about it now. I'm now breaking up the images more and combining the two ideas – the sort of luminous color and the dark feeling.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Some of the things that you did last year I thought were very – well, for one thing they were very thinly painted. Of course, that was one way in which you moved against abstract expressionism I guess.

TONY VEVERS: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And the color just sort of gets into the surface of the canvas, almost like it's staining it.

TONY VEVERS: Well, I don't use much white so in order to get the luminosity I have to use the canvas. So I won't say I stain – I paint very thinly and let the luminosity of the canvas come through and give the canvas light that way. I like painting another way. That's why I like the work of Cullen because he paints impasto. He has the wonderful luminosity of the paint. Which I can't do. Well, I mean I don't do. But I like that way of painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Last year in your show you had a number of things that were painted, that were very intimately a part of your own environment. Some of them were broken into panels so that within a single painting there would be a number of different episodes. Would you like to talk about that a little bit?

TONY VEVERS: Well, what it basically is it's an idea that many people like to feel that art is part of your life, you know, it's not just something you do; that your painting is not an exercise it's not the sort of thing you go down and produce. It's something that comes out of your own personal involvement with life. And I realized maybe a couple of years ago that I couldn't – that a single image wasn't enough. I wanted to have more. I wanted to have, say, several episodes in one canvas of work as a whole with these other episodes going on. There's a big painting up here I want you to see that I did in Indiana that has four separate things. But they all work together plastically. They're all part of a definite feeling I have about a certain part of my life in Indiana. I feel very strongly that art isn't just a – you just don't go into the studio and go to work because anybody can go to work, you know. But it's simply something that comes out of your own experience, out of your very, very personal experience. That's why I don't like so much that's going on. You can put so many colors together and make a painting, or something a visual experience. But for me it should go further. It's more I guess art in the head should be art in the heart. And I think it's something that we're losing. I think the more mechanization takes over the more we're getting involved with technical involvement with painting and sort of a mass way of looking at life with socialism, of course, with anything. We're losing this feeling of the person having his own experiences. And I think it's one of the great things about Milton Avery was. He did this. He painted his own life all the time. And he made a beautiful thing out of it. This is something that's still being done. I think it's not – before we started to turn this one I felt old-fashioned in a way, or old hat. But I still find things to do that haven't been done before maybe or that I think are different or are still I think quite viable in terms of artistic reality. My life I feel is a – I enjoy it immensely. I enjoy life very much. I like to eat, drink and dance and all that jazz and, you know, look at things and enjoy the sea and everything else. And I think this could possibly be important in other people. And I think that painting – it still can be fun, still can be a good thing and a very interesting thing and I think a very valuable thing. Because I don't know, you see some of these young kids around town and they're beautiful kids, wonderful looking girls and guys with their motor scooters and stuff and they always look so unhappy. I think if they could sort of feel this maybe they wouldn't feel so unhappy, you know. Maybe this is very corny but I think it's definitely true. To me it's true anyway.

END OF INTERVIEW

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