



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

**Oral history interview with Richard Diebenkorn,  
1985 May 1-1987 December 15**

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Richard Diebenkorn on May 1, 2 & 7, 1985 and December 15, 1987. The interview was conducted by Susan Larsen for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Richard Diebenkorn and Susan Larsen have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

**RD: Richard Diebenkorn**

**SL: Susan Larsen**

### Session 1

Interview with Richard Diebenkorn  
Conducted by Susan Larsen  
1985 May 1

[Tape 1, side A]

**SL:** So, I think we will start at the beginning, and I just wanted to check certain things that have been common knowledge, but just to affirm with you. You were born in Portland?

**RD:** Yes.

**SL:** In 1922?

**RD:** Yes.

**SL:** And your family had been there a long time or a short time?

**RD:** Short time. They were, my mother was a Californian. She was born in San Diego. And my father came here from Cincinnati in nineteen-o-something-or-other. His business moved him to Portland briefly to start a new office. They eventually became a West Coast company. And he got the office going in Portland, and it took years, I think, and then they moved back to California, back to San Francisco.

**SL:** Is that where they met and got together?

**RD:** I think they met in Los Angeles.

**SL:** And what sort of business did your father. . . .

**RD:** Hotel and restaurant supply company.

**SL:** Oh.

**RD:** And it was the leading restaurant and hotel supply company on the West Coast. And what else?

**SL:** Okay, that was. . . . I just wondered.

**RD:** This [the microphone--Ed.] is close enough?

**SL:** I think so. So, your family moved to San Francisco then in 1924? Is that about right?

**RD:** About, yes. '24 or '25. I'm not just certain of the dates.

**SL:** Okay. And you were the only child?

**RD:** Yes.

**SL:** And did you have a family surrounding you? Cousins and grandmother and aunts and uncles.

**RD:** Grandmother, on my mother's side, and grandfather, on my father's side. So I. . . . My mother and father and me. And my grandmother I saw a lot of, especially during the summer.

**SL:** This was Florence Stephens?

**RD:** Florence Stephens, yes.

**SL:** You've mentioned her. Many people have mentioned her. She was an important person in your young life, I gather.

**RD:** Extremely.

**SL:** She was the one who encouraged your interest in art and reading and many other things?

**RD:** Yes.

**SL:** She sounded like an interesting lady. From what I gather she went back to school in her thirties and was very active in. . . .

**RD:** She became a lawyer, and, well, she was a painter. There's a painter--I mean, painting in the kitchen that I'll show you later of hers. She was a poet, poetess, I guess. Is that a word? No. [laughter]

**SL:** Was she very lively, or quiet?

**RD:** Very lively. Irish-type disposition, since she was born in Dublin. She came to this country in the. . . She came to San Francisco in about 1870.

**SL:** My.

**RD:** And lived on Telegraph Hill.

**SL:** (chuckles)

**RD:** In her later years, she had a radio program in San Francisco, a book review program.

**SL:** Was she involved with new literature, or was it classics?

**RD:** Well, new for the time, I guess. She wrote. She wrote stories and I think she got about a third of them published. She always had something out with, sweating out the response in the mail.

**SL:** I see.

**RD:** What else about her?

**SL:** Did she have you writing stories? Drawing, from an early age?

**RD:** Well, it wasn't exactly that she had me doing it, but she was very appreciative. I think I did the painting on my own, and I think that in a backhanded way, my father was important to the beginnings of my drawing, because I think Richard was totally occupied, and no trouble at all when he had shirt cardboards to draw trains, pictures of locomotives on. And so I really can't remember when I wasn't engaged in that activity for some part of the day--of drawing.

**SL:** That's what you started on, shirt cardboards?

**RD:** Shirt cardboards. I remember they were chipboard surface on one side, that, just, I hated, and the other side was a smooth white, and that I liked to draw on.

**SL:** I know just what you're talking about. So you would spend the summers with your grandmother and. . . . For a short period of time, or long period of time.

**RD:** Well, the whole summer.

**SL:** The whole summer?

**RD:** Yes. She had a small house in Woodside, California. And there was just wild country there then. And so I was loose in the forest [or, and] the hills with bow and arrow or whatever.

**SL:** Really, oh. What else did you like to do besides painting and drawing?

**RD:** Well, I guess I had a pretty good fantasy life during those summers, because I remember I carved--a couple of summers; I must have been eleven and twelve--and carved swords and made shields, and emblazoned them with insignia and. . . .

**SL:** Just like King Arthur and that kind of thing?

**RD:** Sure. Yeah.

**SL:** That was also something you read, I gather, too.

**RD:** Oh, yes. It just occurred to me, talking about my grandmother, I wanted to correct something in this book [Richard Diebenkorn Paintings and Drawings 1943-1976, catalogue of Albright-Knox exhibition, 1976.--Ed.]. They made a very funny mistake. Or a mistake that's very, very misleading. If I were reading it, I wouldn't know what to make of this. It says, it's involved with my grandmother's law activity.

**SL:** Is this something that you. . . .

**RD:** Oh, here. "Mrs. Stephens had returned to school at age 35 to study law. . . . during World War II took on 28 cases defending German-Americans whose civil rights had been violated, and won them all." Well, the mistake there is the "II"; it should be World War I, obviously, and there wasn't that kind of defense of German-Americans in World War II, and there was no. . . . I don't think they, there was any requirement for it, either, that it was a very serious proposition in World War I, and she was sympathetic with the underdog.

**SL:** Um hmm. It would be more likely the Japanese-Americans in World War II.

**RD:** Yeah, yes.

**SL:** Also it didn't make sense if she came to San Francisco in 1870.

**RD:** No.

**SL:** I mean, how could she be 35 in World War II?

**RD:** Yes, exactly. I thought that came out in a very puzzling way.

**SL:** Thank you! [cookies are offered--Ed.]

**RD:** Oh, yes.

**SL:** Thank you very much.

**Another voice:** Don't let the dogs see the cookies.

**RD:** Oh. We have cookies.

**SL:** Oh, okay. That's a magic word always with me. Something I hadn't asked you is what kind, nationality of name is Diebenkorn?

**RD:** Well, I'd always understood it was German, and my father's grandfather came to this country in the, during the Civil War. I say that because they were going to land in New York and they had to go around the Mississippi, come up the Mississippi River. And he died going up the Mississippi River, so my grandfather, who was five, and his mother went to Cincinnati and she immediately remarried someone named Howard. And his. . . . Grandfather kept the name Diebenkorn and. . . . But because of that, really a lot of history was lost that the. . . .

**SL:** Um hmm, the family. . . .

**RD:** . . . that that, that my father's, my great-grandfather would have. . . . My great-grandmother immediately got involved with a different family and so on. But then, so it was, all we knew was that it was a German name, and we knew that history of coming to Cincinnati, and that was all. But then, Phyllis and I were interested to find out really for sure, and we, so we went [to] Europe, and. . . . It was shortly after my father died that my mother had a friend who was Dutch and had been born in Holland and told my mother that she had grown up very close to a community, very small community named Diebenkorn.

**SL:** Ah hah!

**RD:** And so my mother informed--she was getting a little bit on, then, in age--but she informed Phyllis and me one evening, when we had her for dinner, that "It's possible that your name is Dutch," that because of so-and-so who said that. So this sort of threw us in a quandary and it made us--made me--more than determined than ever to figure out what. . . . So we were going to take this trip, and we were--Holland, Germany, Austria, Italy. First time we had done that part of Europe, and. . . . I'm making too long a story of this. But at any rate, we traveled through Holland and Kroller-Muller Museum and all those treats, and we just had this gorgeous time. But all the time, from south of Holland, when we'd stay someplace, I'd look in the telephone book and. . .

**SL:** Did you find any?

**RD:** I found all sorts of names that were very much like it, especially in central, central-eastern Holland. And Holland is sort of a vertical country, and central and eastern. And the names would be right except for one word [means letter--Ed.] here and there. Very, very close. So then finally, then when we got to the south, the names changed character and so [I] sort of gave it up. Well, this isn't true. Oh! Even asked there about a community of Diebenkorn in, and the people who should have known, would have known, said that, "We have no record of anything like that." So then we went on around the coast into Germany and I just, I wasn't even, I'd given up the project, and, but then we went to Hamburg, and we were in the hotel there, and I passed this lobby and this large telephone thing--telephone books and girls sitting around answering questions--and so I went up and looked in the book, and no names like it [but spelled differently--Ed.] at all. But there were four Diebenkorns in the. . . .

**SL:** Perfect, just the same?

**RD:** Yeah. Yeah, God! And no names like them really either. And this gave, made my flesh sort of crawl, because I'd never seen my name other than referring to me or my family.

**SL:** Yes.

**RD:** So, well, to make a long story short, I called one, and the person was very hospitable, had us for tea--I think it was coffee--and this man, who was my age, had his son and his wife-to-be, who was an engineer, and it was all very nice. And they went, they, I guess the son was there because he and his fiancée both spoke English. So we got to talking about the name, and they had recalled the--or the man who was my age had recalled hearing about a great-grandfather who had gone to America and disappeared.

**SL:** Oh, is that right? Fabulous! That must have, it very likely could be.

**RD:** Yeah, yeah. And then they talked about the name and they said that the name originated in Sweden. It was in a dialect. The name meant the grain stacked in the shape of a house. You know, when you see. . . This is a Diebenkorn, but it was spelled different, but I mean, you know, it was essentially. . . .

**SL:** Very interesting.

**RD:** And these, they were farmers, the Diebenkorns, and they came in the, I guess they were at least 17th century or late 16th. It was when Sweden was occupying the northern part of Germany, Prussia, after the Thirty Years War, I guess. At any rate, they came down there about that time, and in [Mecklenberg]. I'm really answering your question, aren't I?

**SL:** That's fine.

**RD:** Then some of them moved, or one branch of the family moved from Mecklenberg to Hamburg, and they in Hamburg--the people we were talking to--said that there are a lot of Diebenkorns in Mecklenberg, whereas there are just very few, just this single branch of the family in Hamburg. So the mystery was cleared up once and for all.

**SL:** That's great.

**RD:** I don't know about my mother's friend who had the Dutch. . . .

**SL:** Maybe she had the German Mecklenberg. . . .

**RD:** And I had always understood that Diebenkorn meant cornfield, but apparently the derivations didn't. . . .

**SL:** Much better. (chuckles) I looked up at that little house-like thing up there. It's sort of like a, almost like a. . . . Oops. [referring to dog?--Ed.]

**RD:** But in the. . . . I had told the photographer, Leo [Holub] . . . . Do you know him?

**SL:** No, I don't.

**RD:** Oh. He's from Northern California, photography. He's very, very good one. Worked for Stanford for a long time. Bruce, no! [speaking to dog--Ed.]

[Break in taping]

**SL:** So, well. So that cleared up some of the mysteries, there. So, as a child in school, were you focused on art, or did you have other things that were more central to your growing-up time?

**RD:** Well, the art was, for me, was always something I did privately. During school I never, I avoided art classes because just to look in at high school, to look in and see what was going on just didn't interest me at all. It wasn't art that I was interested in; it was drawing and painting, which I had really not made a real, I had no real understanding of drawing and painting as art. I have an understanding of drawing and painting in terms of this activity of mine, you see.

**SL:** Um hmm. Did you, had you gone to museums at that point, and had a sense of what was perhaps different than craft kinds of things?

**RD:** Well, yes. [hesitant--Ed.] My grandmother took me. I remember she took me to the Van Gogh show in, at the Palace, California Palace of the Legion of Honor, and that must have been around 1934, somewhere in there.

**SL:** Yes, the one that came from the Museum of Modern Art?/

**RD:** I think it was. . . . Possibly. But my impression is that it was. . . . Was that about that time?

**SL:** I think it was. I mean, I could be wrong. We could look up and find out.

**RD:** It could have been that show, then. What occurs to me in regard to that--I'll get off the track for a moment--as a child going to that show with my grandmother, it was fun. Paintings--I don't know if I really got with it, but it was a memorable day. And the thing that interested me, that is very fresh in my recollection, were the groups of people being taken through that exhibition. Groups of--with a guide, who would be speaking--twenty to thirty people, as we see today, and. . . .

**SL:** How did you feel about that?

**RD:** The people were laughing--in most of the groups--laughing at the pictures! And I remember one--and I remember this rather clearly too--I listened to one of the men, one of the guides talking to the group, and he was contributing to the fun and games about this crazy painting that was on the wall!

**SL:** Really!

**RD:** Yes! As late as. . . . So when the rush to print postcards, books, reproductions, you know, framed pictures, vanGogh's sunflowers for everybody's house, when that occurred--you know, it must have happened very shortly after that. . . .

**SL:** Yes.

**RD:** . . . because the public at that time clearly was very perplexed by. . . .

**SL:** What did your grandmother think about the show?

**RD:** She was interested. When you see her picture in the, she was, did some oil painting, but mostly worked in watercolor, and you'll see that it's pretty traditional watercolor.

**SL:** But so she presented it to you in a positive way?

**RD:** So I think it was. . . . Yeah, this was something to stimulate both of us.

**SL:** Yes.

**RD:** And I'm sure it did [stimulate--Ed.] her, and, because she wasn't laughing with. . . .

**SL:** Um hmm.

**RD:** And I really kind of forget what my responses were to the pictures themselves.

**SL:** They could seem rather. . . . I would think they might seem very bright and overwhelming to someone who hadn't seen them.

**RD:** Oh yes, and I think we forget, we take for granted the kind of distortion that the Expressionists, the expressionist kind of distortion. This is something we assume now, and I think that that recently those assumptions were not, one did not exaggerate or distort. And in line with that, I recall seeing Cezanne for the first time, and it was I think shortly before I went to college, actually. I read Somerset Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence*, and at one point, I remember, the artist's name, the Gauguin character that was named. . . . Strickland! Charles Strickland. You read it.

**SL:** Yes.

**RD:** And there was a short description of his painting, which was a little bit like the painter, Paul Cezanne.

**SL:** Um hmm.

**RD:** Well, I was involved with this story, and then so I wanted to have some idea what Charles



Strickland's painting was like, so I went to the library and got an art book and, which. . . . I mean, it was the only one in a large library, black and white reproductions of Cezanne's pictures. And it was really quite a shock to me!

**SL:** It was.

**RD:** The crazy sort of [breenness, bareness] spareness, and the distortions just hit me very hard. There were tabletops where I felt apples should roll off the. . . . And buildings with skewed verticals and horizontals and backgrounds that. . . . A horizon-line or floor-line which came in from one side at this level and popped out at a different level, and. . . . Very disquieting, shocking, for me. Because my discipline, as a teenager, had been strictly drawing as craft in terms of accurate rendition of what's out there, all the logic of how things sit in relation to their context, and. . . .

**SL:** You had been exposed to things like the work of Howard Pyle? And N.C. Wyeth?

**RD:** Yes.

**SL:** Is it at this point that you were looking at things like that?

**RD:** Yeah, I think Pyle and Wyeth came in, oh, from about age ten onward. On until. . . .

**SL:** Did you see them in books, or. . . .

**RD:** Hmm?

**SL:** Did you see them in books?

**RD:** Oh, in books, yeah.

**SL:** There weren't any original drawings around?

**RD:** I think there weren't any around then. I don't think there was ever an exhibition of them. They were, it was a. . . . Scribner's did a series of children's classics: Kidnapped, Treasure Island, and most of these books were illustrated by Wyeth. And then Howard Pyle illustrated--and I think did the writing too, in archaic style, and the drawings--and illustrated these books, a whole series on Arthurian legends. And the drawings related to--they were somewhat stylized--but related to German 16th-century drawing: Durer, Hans Baldung.

**SL:** Which is, really a somewhat fantastic aspect, versus the more narrative, realist thing.

**RD:** Yes!

**SL:** It's as though you have both of those strains going on, simultaneously.

**RD:** Um hmm, yeah. So they, and then. . . . Oh! Pyle did his marvelous book, the only one that I still have left, that I've hung onto through the years, and that was [Howard Pyle's Book of Pirates], and. . . . I'm sure that both Wyeth and Pyle had a great influence on some of the good directors, movie directors, who were after a, realist directors: Ford, who I think really leaned heavily on, well, Remington, but also on Wyeth. You can just feel that. And then Pyle also. Because there was no fantasy in the pirates thing. Pirates were cool, rough, bad, you know. And deadly. [said with a smile--Ed.] And there was no. . . .

**SL:** Not heroes.

**RD:** No romanticizing. There was in a sense, because, a romanticizing, essentially it's a romantic thing, but no glossing, no kidding.

**SL:** So it was a realist mode in a way.

**RD:** Yeah, yeah.

**SL:** In a way, you have an intersection of things that are very basically American in their roots in art.  
...

**RD:** Um hmm.

**SL:** ... and other than this encounter with a few things that are very European, and an acknowledgement, it seems, of the difference that there was there.

**RD:** With, in so far that we've gone, where do you find the European in...?

**SL:** Well, the van Gogh and the Cezanne and the... .

**RD:** Oh yes, yeah.

**SL:** ... the distortions that you see there.

**RD:** Well, the van Gogh was early.

**SL:** Um hmm.

**RD:** The Cezanne, though--and that's where I got off the track, I think--the Cezanne pictures... There came a change--immediately--for me on looking at these.

**SL:** Really? You could understand it?

**RD:** Yeah. These things hit me very, very hard. I didn't know what to make of them. A little bit repellent even. But I'm, it's such a lesson to me, having had this experience... .

[Tape 1, side B]

**RD:** ... not really gotten into the taste, into our culture's taste, at any rate, middle-class America. When I was a teenager, Cezanne was certainly established in cultural... .

**SL:** But he wasn't a household word, or... .

**RD:** No, no. And I had looked, because of my fascination with drawing and painting, I was just interested in drawing and painting wherever I saw it, and so I wasn't exactly that naive.

**SL:** Did you just pick this up on your own? You found the book and you looked at it and you realized there was something to it?

**RD:** I went to the library and, just to find out who Charles Strickland's paintings looked like.

**SL:** Ah hah!

**RD:** And so there was, there was the answer. But the lesson for me, the thing that I've tried to

communicate to some younger people here and there--and they don't, I can tell they don't get it--it's been a long time since you could shock anybody by showing them a Cezanne or Van Gogh. . . .

**SL:** But when you saw this and it disturbed you, I mean, did you worry over it or did you start immediately to try to take it apart and find out what was going on, and how did it make you feel about what you were doing?

**RD:** Oh, I looked at these pictures a lot and puzzled. I didn't immediately go into my work. Because the next influence that came along in painting was--let's see, there was an interim, the longest time in my whole life that I didn't do any artwork, I mean, drawing or painting, was my first two years at Stanford. And my father had sent me there to be a professional lawyer, doctor, something. And so it wasn't until I enlisted in the military, but still stayed in college, that I began to look around away from what I had been put in school for, which got to boring me quite a bit.

**SL:** You weren't. . . . Were you, as you left high school, had you thought of going into art for a career, or avocation?

**RD:** Well, I thought all along that I'd be a, I wanted to be an artist, which meant--I think maybe it says in the book commercial artist or something. I was emphatic that I was going to continue, or that was my, what I wanted to do.

**SL:** You expressed that, you felt that?

**RD:** Yeah. And I'm sure that saying this at age twelve, my father would smile; saying it at age seventeen, I think he was starting to get nervous. (laughter)

**SL:** Then changed your mind, huh?

**RD:** And it was assumed all along in my teenage years that I'd be going to Stanford and, but of course I was going for a serious reasons; I wasn't going there to become an artist.

**SL:** Did you know any artists, or did your family know any artists? Or was it. . . .

**RD:** Just my grandmother.

**SL:** So it was basically. . . . Did they think of it as more an avocational thing to do?

**RD:** Yeah, um hmm. And I can remember my father telling me at some point, about the time he started getting nervous, when I was getting older and older and still wanting to be an artist, well, I remember a couple of talks where he would say, "You know, this drawing and painting thing is just a fine avocation, and I think you're in an enviable position to have some, to have this to do in your life as well as what you really do with your life." (both chuckle)

**SL:** Which is not unusual. A lot of parents, I would think, would. . . . But it is unusual for someone to have an interest, develop it, stick with it, and express it that directly at that age.

**RD:** Um hmm.

**SL:** That seems to be very unusual.

**RD:** Yes.

**SL:** Especially in the absence of a context that is right there, that's supporting it.

**RD:** Um hmm, um hmm. I never. . . . Look, see, with my own children, with children of friends that, of these kids who are of course marvelous artists, and then that time comes around just about puberty and all this falls away. They become directed in a totally different way. And people sort of grow up, beyond being artists, and I feel fortunate that I didn't grow up--in that sense, or maybe some other sense too! (chuckles)

**SL:** Well, that's quite remarkable. Were there art courses at Stanford that you even looked into?

**RD:** No, that's where we were. When I, after I had joined the Marine Corps, still at Stanford. I knew I wasn't going to be there in school too long, and so I think I took a little advantage of my father and I enrolled in some art courses and proceeded to neglect courses like political science and economics--in fact I got some big fat flunks in those. And of course my father was then nervous, but here was his boy who was. . . .

**SL:** Going to the war, probably.

**RD:** . . . going to be in the war, and, okay, so he became permissive at this point, and so I took further advantage and probably further and further art courses, until that was just about all I was taking. (laughter)

**SL:** Did you. . . . But you hadn't found them that interesting in high school, though. Was it a different kind of thing in college?

**RD:** Well, in high school, I guess I, for one thing I was probably a little intimidated. I can remember standing in the doorway of the art studio at Lowell High School and looking in, and seeing these people busily working, professionally, and this was, what they were doing wasn't at all like the sort of cramped illustrative thing that I was, did at home. They were doing something broad and essentially meaningless to me, kind of oversimplified figure drawings, Diego Rivera influence, and I think I told somebody or other in an interview that there were lots of drawings of big pieces of hemp rope that would have come from Mexican muralists, or dock, longshoreman, social commentary murals, where there were all these big coils of heavy. . . .

**SL:** Even Stuart Davis has a few of those.

**RD:** Yeah, yeah. So this, to draw a piece, to copy a piece of--or an exaggerated somehow in the way they did--piece of rope just meant nothing to me, so I stayed away. But at Stanford it was something different. They had survey courses, and they had a very limited masters program, I think only in art history. But they had studio courses: small, academic, I think you might say, although the people I encountered were good and became lasting friends, Dan Mendelowitz.

**SL:** You studied with Mendelowitz there?

**RD:** Mendelowitz, Dan Mendelowitz.

**SL:** Uh huh. He was the art history professor?

**RD:** He was one of them; there were three. A man named Farmer, and a Russian emigre, Victor Arnautoff, who was a fascinating man.

**SL:** And he taught. . . ?

**RD:** He taught oil painting. Dan--I didn't have much to do with Farmer--Dan Mendelowitz taught

watercolor. And Dan and I became very close friends and [I--Ed.] continued to see him through the years. He died a couple a years ago.

**SL:** I think a lot of us know him for his book on American art, which. . . .

**RD:** Oh, you know. . . .

**SL:** Oh sure. Used the book for years.

**RD:** Um hmm.

**SL:** I gather a bit from what other people have written that he was very interested in the work of Dove and the early American modernists as well as some of the European work as well.

**RD:** Well, I think he was, of any contemporary work, he was--what's the word I want?--that the American moderns were acceptable to him. At that time, the European modernism was really a kind of a thorn in Dan's side. And he, in his, he did marvelous lectures with his survey course, of slides and so astute, but then he'd come to modernism and show Picasso or Matisse--or both--and--of course both--and he couldn't resist making comments that would bring down the house in the little theater there. And he was funny and. . . .

**SL:** So it discouraged further interest.

**RD:** . . . and then he'd sincerely, in such a sincere way, he would defend Matisse and his patterns and what not. "And you know, there's nothing really, nothing wrong with this. It's like a nice necktie. (laughter) A nicely patterned necktie."

**SL:** Goodness.

**RD:** I would never have repeated this story while he was alive, because I think he, he probably. . . .

**SL:** Did he change his mind in later years? He must have.

**RD:** Well, I don't know when he changed his mind. Either he repressed all this that he said, or cringed whenever he thought of it. Where were we?

**SL:** You were at Stanford taking from a liberal group of courses.

**RD:** Yeah.

**SL:** So then did you find that the kind of work and background that you brought into this situation, how did that fare in this climate? And of work that you were doing?

**RD:** Well, very well, because they gave me great freedom at Stanford and I. . . What I haven't said yet, referred to yet, is Edward Hopper, who. . . There was the Cezanne thing, but then I was introduced--or perhaps I knew Hopper a little bit when I came there--but there, with Dan's courses, his photographic slides and. . . [phone rings] That [isn't supposed to] ring.

**SL:** That's okay. I'll just turn it off.

[Break in taping]

**SL:** So, let's see, we were at Stanford and I was asking you, the kind of work that you were doing

when you came, or the kind of work that you'd done prior to entering college, how that transferred itself into that situation?

**RD:** Oh yeah, yeah. Well, so here was Hopper influence, very strong. I was absolutely, very different response from the Cezanne black-and-white reproductions. Here, Mendelowitz thought Hopper was great. Sloan--or not Sloan, but--Reginald Marsh was his, he had studied and that was his god. Not mine--Hopper, but he also loved Hopper and so I was really smitten, love. I mean it wasn't this puzzling thing as with Cezanne. So I embraced Hopper completely, and as you can tell by the reproduction here in the book. . . .

**SL:** This.

**RD:** I of course had to go outside and paint; everyone else painted in the studio, but I was allowed to get in my car and find subjects to work with, and then I would just bring in the pictures for criticism. So I was free to combine some of the influences that are being. . . . There wasn't this kind of thing at Stanford that there had been at high school, the Mexican muralists or the social. . . . Actually it was a bit more modern at high school. (chuckles)

**SL:** Ah. This is Palo Alto Circle, 1943? That's the one you're talking about?

**RD:** Yeah.

**SL:** In terms of what you've admired of Hopper, was it the. . . . Hopper was both a painter of locations and moods and feelings and a painter of figures.

**RD:** Um hmm.

**SL:** And was there an aspect of that appealed to you more than others? You weren't, or were you going out seeking interesting views?

**RD:** I think it was the landscape mainly. The figures seemed then extremely stiff to me. And of course I realize now that that stiffness is part of him, part of what he saying about the people. But that didn't really get to me then. They were simply a bit too stiff, so I preferred the pure, I guess, I was going to say landscape, but cityscape, and. . . .

**SL:** This is a very formal painting. This is arranged in a quite-knowing overlapping way.

**RD:** Huh, well, actually. . . . I know that knowing doesn't have to be right on the surface of things--it wasn't. I mean, I liked the look of that scene, and I sat there and put it down on the canvas. There was no formal, conscious formal attempt.

**SL:** And it wasn't the social scene aspect of that era that interested you at all at that point?

**RD:** No, no. And I think with Hopper, the use of light and shade and the atmosphere, that kind of drenched, saturated with mood, and its kind of austerity, it was the kind of work that just seemed made for me. I mean, it was just, you know, I looked at it and it was mine, which was very different from most of the other, all of the other artists I. . . .

**SL:** It's marvelous; that's proved out over time, too, in a way that's quite surprising, you know, the initial grasp that this is yours. . . .

**RD:** Yes.

**SL:** . . . and all of the subsequent periods of your. . . There's still an essence of that somewhere, [around it all]. Quite intriguing. Did you. . . From what you described previously, it seemed that you were drawing and doing watercolor painting. Now had you switched to oil painting at this point? And had to master that whole medium? Or had you been working in that way before?

**RD:** I was working in both ways. I was signed up with Arnautoff and Mendelowitz, and one day I'd do watercolors; another day, as the spirit moved me, and. . . I never had great problems with oil paint. The watercolor medium was transparent watercolor, which, looking back, it seems--well, Dan was a watercolorist, in that Homer tradition, but to start people out, that seems a little bit wrong to me, to start people out with a very difficult, with a difficult medium like that, and oil paint or gouache paint is pretty forthright, but watercolor is, requires so much kind of understanding of the medium in a way that the others--of course require their understanding too--but there's so much kind of skill involved in things that one should know that one can't talk of watercolor in the sense that one wants to really follow this painting through, because if you do, you start to make changes, and then it's just, it's not as great. And that seems wrong to me for. . . I don't know why I'm off on this.

**SL:** Oh, that's okay.

**RD:** It doesn't seem quite right for a student to. . .

**SL:** Um hmm, to have to tackle the most difficult thing right off.

**RD:** Yeah, yeah. One should have a medium that lends itself to digging in, I would think.

**SL:** So there you were enjoying all of this wonderful experience and the war was right over your shoulder, and you were already enlisted? How was it that you were able to go to school and. . .

**RD:** Well, they had a program, it was called the V-12 program, a navy program, and my branch of it was Marines. And the idea was that, these people came to colleges and recruited the students, and I was assured by the Marine Corps that I would stay in Stanford until I graduated, and then I would go on into active service. And maybe they did mean that, maybe they weren't lying, but I, there were some disasters in the Marines, and so they started calling up their reserves a lot sooner than they intended. I guess that's giving them the benefit of the doubt. (laughter) But at any rate, I only stayed at Stanford one quarter--maybe a quarter and a half after I actually signed up. But I was not in uniform at Stanford. And then. . . Should I go on to UC?

**SL:** Yeah. I was also interested though, this was about the time that you married Mrs. Diebenkorn, Phyllis?

**RD:** Yeah, I, we married when I left. . . Well, a couple of weeks before I went to UC Berkeley.

**SL:** I remember you told me--it was years ago--about how you had broken your leg or something, and she had come to visit you in a hospital. Am I remembering this correctly, or. . .

**RD:** No, you're not.

**SL:** No.

**RD:** She had appendicitis and I visited her.

**SL:** Oh, okay, all right.

**RD:** And maybe the accident to me, I had an accident in my freshman year at Stanford--I fell out of a window--but I didn't know her then.

**SL:** I've got it all turned around I think.

**RD:** Yeah, well. (chuckles)

**SL:** So you two met each other very young and were. . . .

**RD:** Yeah, my last. . . . I guess I had met her once before but--earlier, a year earlier--that she had been away from school for several quarters and then she came back and during my last quarter I met her then. And so then we got married when I left Stanford and when, after I actually, I had, when I was married, I had my orders to be on active duty at University of California.

**SL:** That must have been hard. My goodness. All of these rapid changes and. . .

**RD:** Oh yes, yeah.

**SL:** . . . desire to be at home, just when you have to go and. . . .

**RD:** So, at, I saw her on weekends, when I was at Callahan Hall, which was International House at UC, Berkeley.

**SL:** Was she also an art student?

**RD:** No, she was American literature, English and American literature, her major at Stanford, and later on, psychology, when she went back to school, much, after the war.

**SL:** Okay. And while you were going, was she in school with you?

**RD:** At Stanford. But she wasn't in school. She went to work as a draftsman for the, [I think] at Fort, Fort something or other in San Francisco?

**SL:** As a draftsman?

**RD:** Yeah.

**SL:** So she could draw as well?

**RD:** Yeah. In her last, in that quarter at Stanford when we met, she was taking drafting, I guess with the Navy there.

**SL:** My!

**RD:** It was a Navy-sponsored course at Stanford. So she was a qualified draftsman at the time we were married. So then she proceeded to continue that activity while I was in the service.

**SL:** That's an interesting accomplishment for someone in literature. (chuckles)

**RD:** Yeah. Well, but I think her big job was when she went out to a troop ship that, or a ship that was, had just come in, I guess, a troop ship, and it was going to be converted into a hospital ship, or something, something like that, and she was assigned the whole latrine system. (laughter) And so she, for about six months, all she drew was positioned latrines, and positioning, and. . . . (more



laughter)

**SL:** Yeah, I guess in time of war you do what you have to do.

**RD:** Yeah.

**SL:** So in the summer of '43, then, you were in the Marine Corps officer training, and then you went to Berkeley, and you were transferred to Berkeley?

**RD:** Um hmm.

**SL:** And you, again, though, in, you were being trained to do, what? Maps or some kind. . . .

**RD:** No, that comes later. No, I was in regular OCS, Officer Training [Officer Candidate School--Ed.]

**RD:** And I was in uniform and. . . . You know, shall I just proceed?

**SL:** Please do, yes.

**RD:** It was a Marine Corps unit at, along with lots of Navy. There was a Marine Corps sergeant and there was a commandant, a captain. And so we took classes, although we got up very early and did all sorts of exercises and ran all the. . . . There were about 35 of us that ran all over the campus in the, every morning. And we got weekends off. And what the majors were, I mean, what people specialized in, had to do somewhat with what they had done at Stanford. Although in some cases, it was kind of terrible, and I do, I recall this, standing in line at, the first day, and, with a sergeant and the captain behind a desk reassigning, reassigning one's major, so that. . . . And I'm standing in this line and a business major would become a physics major, and you'd see these people clap their hands to their foreheads, and say, "Oh, my god!"

**SL:** Oh, my. "I'm not going to do that," huh?

**RD:** So just about everybody was being changed, was having their central activity changed, and then they came to me. And they were going by lists, so if you were, if you were a biology major, well, the sergeant would go down the list, "Duh, duh, duh, biology." And then there would be a paralleling column. Well, a biologist becomes a. . . .

**SL:** Hospital corpsman, or something?

**RD:** Something like that. And so he went down the list and he didn't find any art. So he said, "Well, we'll keep you in art." (laughs) Which was. . . .

**SL:** Great!

**RD:** So I was the only person in this quite large art department there, as opposed to the really small one at Stanford.

**SL:** And that's where you ran into Erle Loran?

**RD:** Yeah.

**SL:** And Worth Ryder?

**RD:** Yeah, um hmm, yeah. And Eugene Neuhaus. And I was the only art student in uniform. And I

drew and painted. . . .

**SL:** Had. . . . At that point was Erle Loran teaching the kind of thing he wrote in his book on Cezanne?

**RD:** Yeah.

**SL:** The composition?

**RD:** Yeah, uh huh.

**SL:** And he had been, I gather, a Hans Hofmann student?

**RD:** Yeah, um hmm. [Exactly].

**SL:** And that sounded somewhat like what Hofmann taught back east as well.

**RD:** Exactly.

**SL:** And was that something that you had, I mean, you had contact with?

**RD:** I had had no contact with it before. His book wasn't, he was writing the book. It was well known that Erle Loran had a book that was going to come out next year. And when I saw the book--and I still think it's an impressive book--but there were no surprises for me, because I'd had it all in the, in his courses. So the book was, and the teaching were one and the same. And so then the Cezanne thing picked up again.

**SL:** Yes. And it renewed some of those interests. . . .

**RD:** Oh, absolutely! And so then I fell really into this.

**SL:** Did you embrace it, or were you still wondering about it, or. . . .

**RD:** Oh absolutely! And Cezanne was in a somewhat. . . .

End Tape 1

[Tape 2, side A] [Note: Side B not recorded]

**SL:** So he was teaching, then painting, and using the Cezanne structures as an adjunct to the painting course, or. . . .

**RD:** Let's see, did I have a painting course from him? I'm not sure. I think it was mostly drawing from him. I think it was with Worth Ryder that I did painting. But then, then I worked things out so that I could paint outside, like [I \_\_\_\_\_, name?]. And Loran was very resistant at first to that, but then he let me do it. So I'd bring my work in and talk to him in his office, and that was fun.

**SL:** I would think it would be.

**RD:** We argued, and. . . .

**SL:** Oh, you did. What did you argue about?

RD: Well, I had resistance to him. He was a pretty. . . . Well, he was didactic, he was. . . .

SL: He was?

RD: Yeah.

SL: Did he tell you what to do?

RD: Well, he was. . . .

SL: How to do it?

RD: Well, he would talk about composition exclusively, and he would, he would make pronouncements that sometimes I just couldn't accept. [phone rings] Dammit!

[Break in taping]

RD: Oh yeah.

SL: What is. . . . You were out painting and discovering your own subjects and bringing the paintings back?

RD: Well, he had. . . . I don't, I'm not putting him down when I say this, but he had really ironclad theory, primarily--almost exclusively--based on Cezanne. And there were things that I just had to challenge--small--when he'd make his sweeping pronouncements.

SL: What was it that you wanted in your work that perhaps didn't fit his formula?

RD: I just suspected that you were going to ask when I said that there were things that I took exception [to--Ed].

SL: (chuckles)

RD: I think that I. . . . I don't. . . . We had several almost-arguments. But, the, I only remember the subject of one. . . . There was a Cezanne reproduction that he brought out for some reason or other which had, it was back to the apples falling off the table. There was this tilted top, and there was something that he wanted me to do in my painting that, he wanted me to show rooftop or something or other and not have it move out into depth where it would go off into a tunnel or something, get lost to the surface. And he brought out, I guess he brought out this reproduction, [the, Cezanne's] illustration of this tabletop that came up and this was kind of distortion, I, that, not exactly in the picture, but. . . . Theoretically this was not right somehow that one made this kind of, this kind of tampering with the logic of gravity, and this was something that was, that I wasn't going to accept. So that's the only, that's the only. . .

SL: Did you feel that perhaps you had some allegiance to what things really, what nature did, that you could observe, rather than a formula that would be followed?

RD: I think so, yeah.

SL: Because there's always a great deal of nature in Cezanne, and Cezanne made his negotiations with what he saw.

RD: Exactly, sure.

SL: And he would be. . . .

RD: And they were a bit in conflict with mine so far, and. . . .

SL: Also maybe to do justice to him, and to his way of. . . . You'd have to find your own way of doing it.

RD: I think so. Yes.

SL: One can be inspired but not maybe imitate.

RD: Exactly.

SL: Was there any talk of Hofmann and what Hofmann was doing back in New York, or was this sort of implied?

RD: A little bit. I wasn't, I heard the name, of course, there, but nobody was really saying I'm presenting Hofmann's theories. So it was, Hofmann was just a name when I, at that time, when I was at UC. I'm trying to think what else would have happened there in the art way.

SL: Because Hofmann did teach there briefly, in what, '31 was it?

RD: Yeah, yeah. I think it was '30--'30, '31, somewhere in there. It had an enormous impact on, I guess, Loran and John Haley and Worth Ryder, [a, the] sculptor. I can't remember.

SL: But already in the world, surrealism was rearing its presence. . . .

RD: Yes, it was.

SL: . . . and things were changing, and yet that wasn't much in the air yet at that point?

RD: Well, as I recall, there was--now I'm not certain of this--but I kind of that surrealism had a kind of bad name at UC with all that. . . . It was. . . . I'm not certain what place surrealism did have.

SL: Yeah, I know. . . . Among, at least in the later thirties, people who admired the more cubist/constructivist tradition coming out of Cezanne tended--some of them, at least in New York that I know of, Gallatin, Morris, those people--tended to truly disapprove of especially the more realistic types of surrealism.

RD: Um hmm, yeah.

SL: And Miro was perhaps as far as they would go in that direction.

RD: That's right, yes. And [Masson].

SL: They felt it didn't have plasticity.

RD: [Ernst], they would accept.

SL: No, these people wouldn't have accepted Ernst.

RD: Hmm?

SL: I mean, these people I talked to wouldn't have accepted Ernst either, but of course the Guggenheim group and Pollock and those people of course did.

RD: Um hmm.

SL: So then you were reassigned to Washington, D.C., area?

RD: First I went to South Carolina to boot camp. No art there. (chuckles) Just a lot of splashing around in swamps and. . . . That was mercifully short, boot camp tour. Then to North Carolina, Camp Lejune, which corresponded to Camp Pendleton in the west--big, the biggest Marine Corps base--and there my unit, well, we were put through the paces, given further training and awaiting. . .

SL: Did you feel that you were. . . .

RD: Hmm?

SL: Did you feel you were about to go to the front?

RD: Well, no, not yet. We were awaiting the official OCS, the real OCS, which was, is, took place at Quantico, Virginia. So North Carolina was--well, the word boondocks originated there. And so I was there for, oh, four months, something like that. And then, then to Quantico. And that was, oh well, that was a tough one. That's when I got kicked out of OCS.

SL: What did you do or not do?

RD: Well, I did some kind of dumb things. I had an argument of. . . . Dumb thing. I. . . . Shall I go into detail like this, or. . . .

SL: It's interesting, but it doesn't. . . . If you don't want to, it's your choice.

RD: Yeah.

SL: I think it means Officer Candidate School.

RD: Yeah, that's right. Well, I guess the worse thing I did was I was leading my platoon and we came to this, it was, each person had a turn leading the platoon, each person in the platoon, so I was platoon leader for this problem of bringing my platoon through a swamp and arriving at what I found was a little fortified situation with a Japanese flag sticking up there. And, well, I'm making myself the hero here, but this was one of the reasons why I got kicked out of OCS. I had my platoon be very careful, lay low, and I'm very, very cautious about this thing, because I thought that the thing was probably booby-trapped.

SL: Sure.

RD: And I forget how, exactly how it worked out, but somebody sneaked in and tossed a grenade in and presumably blew up the thing, but it was taken, the position was taken very unspectacularly, and the sergeant was absolutely furious because I didn't show any Marine Corps spirit.

SL: Oh. (laughs)

RD: That I should have moved right in there, and I should have, I should have smashed the flag, and I just couldn't behave right at all.

SL: Oh my.

RD: And I just blew up, because I was sure, and I . . .

SL: Oh. You told him off?

RD: I told him off! And maybe this was another test. Maybe it's subtler than I think. Maybe they were testing my, could I, could I stand there and take what the sergeant told me.

SL: That's when you showed the Marine Corps spirit, right?

RD: Uh, yeah. I should have just stood at attention and said, "Yes, sir." Maybe it was all a rather complex test, but I fell the other way, and so! That had repercussions, and then a week later I dropped my rifle at a parade in a ceremony where the commandant of the Marine Corp was present. And so I found myself kicked out.

SL: Did you have great aspirations that you were going to succeed? Did it bother you at all?

RD: It didn't, somehow it didn't bother me very much. And in my recollection (chuckles), the thing that bothered me the most was that I had been fitted for my uniform, my officer's uniform. We all had gone to this tailor one day. And there were these marvelous short coats that the Marine Corps officers, a lot of them, wore. They were camel's hair and they are absolutely beautiful. They were a little short of the knee and really, really something. No enlisted man got close to one of those. And I had, was fitted for that. And I recall that this was my big sadness, that I wasn't. . . .

SL: That you weren't going to get your coat?

RD: . . . going to get my coat. (laughter)

SL: Maybe it saved your life too, not to get the coat.

RD: Yeah. Well, I'll try and be a little faster.

SL: Oh, that's okay. So you apparently though were able to go to Washington, in and out of Washington at some point in this time?

RD: Yeah, well, this was a very different thing that I went into at this point, because everything had been programmed for me previously--I mean, I was in OCS--and suddenly I was to be an enlisted man, and plenty of those there, different barracks and. . . Well, I was still in my barracks--I hadn't moved out yet, in OCS--and. . . Some of this I've told, and maybe it's in that book, I don't know, but at any rate, around Christmas I did a lot of drawings of a couple of officers and the sergeants. I did one drawing and so then they all wanted these drawings to send home for Christmas.

SL: Sure.

RD: And so I did these very controlled, and I think pretty good portraits. I guess they stylistically are. . . I think they were kind of Holbein-derived.

SL: Oh, they're nice. I'll bet they were beautiful.

RD: I think some of them were pretty good. But at any rate, one sargeant was especially interested in what was going to happen to me, because he felt gratitude that I'd just given him this drawing to send to his mother, and he talked to the commanding officer, and so I had an interview with the

commanding officer, and he said, "Well, I'm sending you to the photographic section here, because I think that with your drawing abilities they can use you over there. So I was transferred to the photographic section which was primarily Disney, Walt, the Disney people.

SL: Really! Oh!

RD: Yeah. Because the photographers were off in the Pacific, the Disney people were doing maps, animated maps, to. . . .

SL: Oh, I see. They had special skills that suited that kind of map-making.

RD: Um hmm. So these were training films, and [I] played with an animated map to show how positions were taken.

SL: Yeah, um hmm.

RD: So that's what I was assigned to do. And so I made some friends there, right away. It was a jolly group. And I didn't have their kind of skills at all, but. . . . So I got less and less to do. Each big map wash that I tried to make and then there'd be a big bubble or blob in it every time, and I just couldn't do that kind of thing. Well, I would get left fewer and fewer assignments, and finally I found myself with art materials and. . . .

SL: Free time, huh?

RD: . . . free time. (laughs) So that went on for quite a while. But in the meantime, on weekends I was able to, Quantico was something like 30 miles from Washington, D.C. and Phyllis was living in, across the river from Washington. I can't. . . .

SL: So she sort of traveled around the country?

RD: Yeah, um hmm.

SL: [Typical] story then, moving [one, then], my goodness.

RD: She stayed with friends in Williamsburg, I think, while I was in North Carolina, and then she moved to. . . . I can't think of the old city across the river from the. . . . It's in Virginia. Well, at any rate, we had a house and I was there on the weekends. But then we went to the museums, all the time. Just feasted--on the National Gallery and Phillips Memorial Gallery and Corcoran and. . . .

SL: I gather the Phillips was a special favorite, from things I've read?

RD: Yeah. It was, then it had. . . . It's continually expanding. I think they expanded again for the second time just recently. But then it was simply a big--I guess one would call it a mansion--big old house, furnished, and somehow survived the public trooping through all the time. But there were the original rugs on the floor, the original furniture, and one was made to, the hospitality was extended, especially to servicemen, and. . . .

SL: At that point they had the. . . .

RD: . . . one could smoke and sit in the rooms and talk and look, and. . . .

SL: A very different museum style than today?

RD: Very different, yes.

SL: They were rich then in the Impressionist, post-Impressionist, and American paintings?

RD: Um hmm, yeah. Yeah, post-Impressionist, their strongest suit. Well, Bonnard. And then American modern.

SL: Um hmm. Do you remember things that were particularly interesting?

RD: Let's see. The Matisse, the nude on the couch in the room and the sun, out the window.

SL: Interior Nice is it?

RD: No, no, this was before Nice. Paris Roux something or other Ste. Michel, I think.

SL: Ah, is it this one?

RD: Yeah. [The Studio, St. Michel, 1916, page 6, fig. 3]

SL: Okay. So The Studio Que Ste. Michelle. 1916.

RD: Yeah. So that was the big, that was the big one for me. And I did a lot of looking at that. Other things. Well, there were. . . .

SL: Dove, you may have. Did he have a lot of Dove?

RD: Dove? Dove.

SL: Was there any. . . . Did you have any affinity for those, or. . . .

RD: Some. I guess of that group, Dove interested me the most, much more so than Georgia O'Keeffe. Who else was there? \_\_\_\_\_.

SL: Probably Marin.

RD: Marin, yeah. And he interested me. Kandinsky was a little, maybe he was. . . . I think he was early on in that group. He was younger than. . . . Duncan Phillips was interested in Kandinsky.

SL: Oh yes. He sure was.

RD: There was Feininger.

SL: Were you. . . .

RD: Yes.

SL: When you fixed on this painting, apparently from what we've talked about so far that Matisse had been mentioned a lot by your teachers but not with any particular emphasis?

RD: Uhhh, Loran had. . . . I think I'd started to get interested there. Loran's book of Matisse. But it wasn't until, it wasn't until Washington that Matisse really hit me hard.

SL: That's okay. I was, as with the Hopper experience, this became then a central concern. Did you go around then looking for other works, and reading and studying? Or was it this particular,



something about this particular painting that. . . .

RD: This was the thing that I think impressed me the most, that took my attention primarily, but there was just a lot that was being presented, and we also went to Philadelphia a couple of times. And that's where I saw the [A.E.] Gallatin Collection. Saw that several times. There's a marvelous small Matisse in that, although it. . . . I lost the word again. It didn't, the Matisse didn't really go with the rest of the. . . .

SL: No, it didn't, and it's a, I think, a single painting, that's all he had of Matisse. I don't it measures up to this painting either for interest.

RD: I guess it doesn't. It's much smaller. It's a terrific painting. I saw it recently.

SL: It has a chair, Louis XV chair, window. . . .

RD: . . . and window, yeah.

SL: And it's warm in tone?

RD: Yeah. Yeah. But wonderfully painted. It's a very good one, and I guess there are things about it that tie it to the rest of Gallatin selections. There's a simplicity that it has and it's terribly rich in the way it's painted, but [there it sits], and a fairly austere one in other ways.

SL: Um hmm. It could go with the general tenor of the collection. . . .

RD: Yeah.

SL: . . . but not the. . . .

RD: Well, then, so this was a whole different thing, that the Phillips didn't supply, really, was that aspect of modernism.

SL: The Cubist paintings, and the Constructivist things?

RD: Cubist and Constructivist, yeah. I remember Schwitters was somebody that struck me, and Arp.

SL: Yes, he has great, Arp.

RD: And then, there's Giacometti vertical standing figure, and I'd never seen anything like that before. And that struck me. He wasn't a. . . . No, no! Giacometti, it was not Giacometti. It was Gonzales.

SL: Yes, that's \_\_\_\_\_. Yeah, uh huh.

RD: And it's just about. . . . I've seen, I didn't see any more Gonzales after that for years and years, but now I think I saw a little exhibition of his fairly recently, and so I know what his other work was like, but this one stood all alone, and I wondered. . . . There was a little something about him in the catalogue, I think, but, that he had worked with Picasso, and helped Picasso with welding and, but then he was a mystery from then until, oh, until maybe twenty years ago.

SL: Um hmm. Only David Smith quite understood what that could mean.

RD: Yes, uh huh. So that when finally I saw David Smith, well then I moved right to Gonzales.

SL: So this was like a real feast of the original material? All the things that. . . .

RD: Oh yes. Which one didn't. . . . San Francisco had a few things, so that before I left to go east I did do a couple of tours of the San Francisco Museum. It was really quite small. But there was that Pollock Guardian of the Secret, I think. And. . . .

SL: Yes. What did you think? Do you remember what you thought of that when you saw it?

RD: I was impressed by it. And along with it--I don't the She Wolf was there; I think it was. . . I know, it was in the Dyn magazine, it was reproduced in a Dyn magazine publication that they, that I bought at the, at their small bookstore, or at the desk. So, I related the She Wolf to the Guardian of the Secret. The She Wolf I remembered as something that was very immediate for me. I, and, but it took me in to the Guardian of the Secret. They, somehow these paintings are related in format and time when they were done.

SL: Yes, in '43.

RD: Yeah. And then there were a couple of Gorkys, early, before the later. . . .

SL: The Enigmatic Combat, I think was the painting they had.

RD: Is that it? They were heavily painted, and. . . .

SL: Yes.

RD: . . . one was very much Picasso, but, in its own personal aspect. The other one was still heavily painted and had a lot more Miro in it and was kind of on the way to the later, to his later work.

SL: That's \_\_\_\_\_.

RD: What other pictures did they have?

SL: Did you understand this, in the sense of a new attitude, grouping, happening in American painting? Were these isolated or what, did they \_\_\_\_\_ . . . .

RD: I hate to keep referring to the book, but I've got to say somewhere that I, about the Motherwell in the. . . . There were two Motherwells reproduced in that book, Dyn. And especially there. There was really kind of a new flavor that was very attractive to me, that, it had to do with how I was thinking and yet to go to a museum, or to look at French modernism or. . . .

[Tape 2, side B, not recorded]

End of Tape 2

[Tape 3, side A]

RD: Okay. Well, I was just starting to say how the Motherwell and. . . . Oh, yes, and the [William--Ed.] Baziotes. There was an early Cubist-related Baziotes.

SL: In San Francisco?

RD: No, no. In the book.

SL: Uh huh.

RD: And so, it was these two, the Motherwell and the Baziotes, that really. . . . I didn't know who these people were, but they, just in these. . . . I think Baziotes was in black and white; at least one of the Motherwells was in color. And they grabbed me. There was a new flavor, something I hadn't seen in French modernism, or in the, as I was saying, in the Stieglitz modernist, American modern. And something very fresh and compelling and. . . . Well, pretty soon that . . . burgeoned. From about that point, so within five years that was, and then it became Abstract Expressionism.

SL: Right.

RD: This was my first little sniff of it.

SL: And that's pretty early, by '43, '44.

RD: That would have been '43, yeah.

SL: That's very, very early. The paintings were barely dry by that time.

RD: Yeah. (both chuckle)

SL: Did you feel that was part of your generation, or that you were slightly younger than that? Did you have a sense of that? Or any thought about it at all?

RD: Well, I think it was. Then at that time, practitioners were really a generation ahead of me.

SL: Yes they were.

RD: But certainly there was nothing around that a person five years younger, as I was--or ten years younger--would have gravitated to, rather than. . . . That was the kind of thing that was, that was coming on. And it was not a style. Baziotes and Motherwell, they were very different, and it wasn't a stylistic thing. It was somehow just a bringing together pertinent, relevant. . . . \_\_\_\_\_, how do you say these things?

SL: It's a kind of synthesis, isn't it? Many strong things. . . .

RD: Yes!

SL: . . . that were hard to fit together, that were of interest and value but how to put them together.

RD: Exactly. That's very good.

SL: So the sources are common but the result isn't identical.

RD: Right. Yeah.

SL: But that, that's a very. . . . In a way it was a very important opportunity to see all of this. How, what a strange set of circumstances, though. (laughs)

RD: Yeah, um hmm. So where do you want to go now?

SL: Well, let's see. So just about this time, there you were participating in the map project, and. . . .

RD: Oh yes.

SL: . . . then the war abruptly ended, right about there?

RD: No, then I was transferred to Camp Pendleton, and the photograph, the photographic section was really kind of a boondoggle there. We made, sort of made some training films, which I don't think ever really materialized. We went out and drove around the immensity of, on these little roads, of Camp Pendleton, and it was mostly pleasure, fun, although we were doing something, and we were in uniform and we set up camp and cameras, and then there were, I think there was no, none of the training film, map, the Disney people were not doing anything there. And there was another aspect of the photographic section that was serious. And these were the photographers, and they were being used in the field. They were out there, and that was tough, and they would come in occasionally and get a glimpse of the soft life that their officers had and the technicians, the Disney people, artists, had. And so the next thing was being transferred to the Hawaiian Islands, and presumably a little more training there, and then on to Japan.

SL: Where you would have been in a combat role?

RD: Yeah.

SL: Just \_\_\_\_\_.

RD: And the idea of, which kind of terrified me, was that we were, there were to be teams, three-man teams, and the team was composed of a photographer, a writer, and a graphic artist--so I'd be the graphic artist. The artist. . . . The photographer carried his camera and a pistol, and the writer I think carried a carbine and his writing pad, and the artist his art materials and pistol. (laughs) Three. . . .

SL: Oooh.

RD: And these teams were to be sent ahead of an invasion point. So these. . . .

SL: An avant garde group!

RD: Yes, avant garde. (laughter) And these teams would investigate the situation. (laughs)

SL: God that's dangerous, that's terrible.

RD: And send their report. So their job was two-fold really. One, it was to bring back information, of course, about the \_\_\_\_\_ . . . .

SL: I see.

RD: . . . about the forthcoming landing. And the other thing was to take this material and take it back and make training films out of this material.

SL: So it was reconnaissance as well as documentation.

RD: Yeah, yeah. So there was that which loomed in my future, and so I have to admit when the news came--and it came gradually--of the bomb. . . . The word. . . ? "We've dropped a huge bomb that's wiped out Japan," or something like that. A crazy story. So it took about three days to really

get it straight what happened. And I have to admit I looked at that whole, the whole bomb thing as, with immense relief.

SL: Um hmm, sure.

RD: The war clearly was going to be over shortly, and. . . .

SL: And wouldn't depend on your group going out with a sketch pad.

RD: Exactly. So the connotations of the atomic bomb really didn't sink in for a little while for me.

SL: Most people didn't understand.

RD: For most people, yeah.

SL: So, then, were you just immediately released and that was that?

RD: Sent back very soon after that. I went to San Diego and cooled my heels for a month, and then up to San Francisco to Treasure Island, and then we were next door to a. . . . Our barracks was exactly like a barracks next door of German prisoners of war from Africa. (laughs)

SL: Oh my! (laughs)

RD: What a tough bunch they were. Right next, with just a fence between us, a wire fence. Then back to San Diego and then discharged from there.

SL: So then you and Phyllis made a beeline back to San Francisco?

RD: Yeah. . . .

SL: As fast as you could?

RD: Well, I guess we went and lived with my parents who lived in Atherton [California--Ed.]. We lived there for a bit. And so at that time, I decided that I'd go to art school. I guess by this time then the idea of going back to Stanford and doing a lot of pre-law, all the stuff I'd neglected when I was there, was out of the question, and so I enrolled at the California School of Fine Arts, which is now the San Francisco Art Institute, and painted as a student for a semester. And then I received a grant, called Bender Grant-in-Aid, supposedly money for a year. It was \$1500, something like that. And I was informed at the school by Doug McAgy that, and when I finished up with this grant, they would like me to come back and teach.

SL: Oh!

RD: So Phyllis and I went back, we were going to live in New York, and New York was absolutely full and very expensive, and I guess we were at a small artists' party somewhere and we were saying, well, we just had to go back home again because we this rather little money that we had wanted to extend this for a year and we certainly couldn't make it, and the person said, "Well, why not go up to Woodstock?" The artists leave there in the winter, for the winter, and then you can, there are lots of places to rent if you don't mind being snowbound. So that's where we went. So I just, I painted in Woodstock and we were snowbound, most of the time, and met a couple of people there, artists.

SL: How was, did you get in and around New York at that period, and did you see what was going on there?

RD: I came down to New York, I think probably all in all about four times the whole time we were. . . .

SL: You didn't fall into the crowd at the Cedar Bar or any of those legendary. . . .

RD: Not that time. A later visit, did. But I did, I went to the Sam Kootz Gallery, to look up the paintings of Matisse [slip of the tongue--meant Robert Motherwell--Ed.] and Baziotes. Somebody else's work was up on the wall at the time. Sam Kootz was just so good. You know, I suspect that I told you a lot of this stuff in our interview. Am I repeating myself a lot?

SL: Uh, not too much, no. And again, this is really not for me; it's for posterity.

RD: Okay. I told Sam that I'd come to see Motherwells and Baziotes and I was a little disappointed. This was a fine painter; I think it was Byron Browne.

SL: Oh my, yes.

RD: "But this isn't what I came for," and he said, "Well, we have some Motherwells and we have some Baziotes in the, in our storage that I can show you. Also, Baziotes is in my office right now."

SL: Oh my! Oh what fun.

RD: So we went back and we struck it up and we talked and he invited--Phyllis wasn't with me--but he invited me and then when he realized that my wife was along, Phyllis too, to their house for dinner. And I saw a work. . . . I think he was working in his house, but then there were a lot of new paintings sitting around. They were very different from the Cubist-oriented stuff that. . . .

SL: He was. . . .

RD: Then at the time I didn't, wasn't as sympathetic with the things he was doing then, which is really what his later style was.

SL: Yes. So, which. . . .

RD: I was really most interested by the Cubist orientation. But nevertheless, I was interested in these too, and certainly interested in Bill, you know. And so there was that contact.

SL: That's very nice.

RD: And then I guess I went by and saw [Stanley--Ed.] Hayter. . . .

SL: Ah hah.

RD: . . . and Atelier 17, whatever it was. And went out to lunch with him, and enjoyed that brief visit.

SL: Were you interested in printmaking early, or did that come up later in your. . . .

RD: I really wasn't interested in printmaking at all, but I forget why. . . . I think they were also in Dyn magazine. There was a print of Hayter. And something about his atelier. I guess that's why I went by. So, I. . . .

SL: So did you find that New York felt open and welcoming to you, or was it \_\_\_\_\_ . . . .

RD: Yes, uh huh. Yeah, except in the nitty gritty aspect of it: where I could stay. So then Woodstock,

and I really worked hard there. Long, long hours, and. . . .

SL: Were you painting from the countryside, from nature?

RD: Oh, no, no. I was doing abstract paintings.

SL: Doing abstract?

RD: Yeah. Really, I had started doing abstract painting when I was in the service. A little of both, a little of everything then. I did landscapes, but stuff from actual observation on the various bases, and then my indoor painting was abstraction, putting together all this, all this stuff, that I'd been exposed to. Trying to put it together. And that's what Woodstock amounted to, was attempting to assimilate all this stuff that I had. Because a new influence had come in, a new, a whole new set of almost concepts. Well, the class, classes I had with David Park. . . .

SL: Yes, I wanted to ask you about him.

RD: He presented a whole new bag to me, not new, but a different take on. . . .

SL: I gathered he was a real person you felt deeply attuned to, someone you liked very much.

RD: Oh yes, absolutely, yeah.

SL: Whose work you admired.

RD: Right. So there was David Park's influence, I suppose that I was dealing with also in Woodstock.

SL: Do you feel he emphasized the figure as well as abstraction, or was it what he did or what he taught, or. . . ?

RD: At the time, he was doing, he was doing really Picasso-related. . . . He was doing heads. The paintings were very flat, very simple. It was, I guess you'd locate the Picasso period as late thirties. Where the simplest painting in that period might have been something like David was doing. But they were just kind, they were small paintings and divided by perhaps a profile, very simple profile, and a mouth, an eye and usually other, heavily painted. Not broadly, not, not any Abstract Expressionist. . . . [But, That] strong set, surface-oriented--really quite beautiful paintings. Very strong and simple. And so that's what he was doing, and so his sympathies went, I guess he was most interested in me and one other--myself, and another painter. We were the only ones then doing, in his class, doing abstract painting. And the rest of the people were working from still life in the room. And he had a model occasionally.

SL: He wasn't too much older than you? Eleven years?

RD: He was eleven years older, yeah.

SL: And he, how did you feel about what he was doing in relation to what you were doing? Was it similar?

RD: Umm, well, I described to you his. In this book. . . . I guess this isn't coming off on tape, but. . . . Now this [Advancer, 1946-47, Fig. 9, page 9.--Ed.] would be a, really Park influence.

SL: I see.

RD: It isn't a profile. It doesn't have the eye and the nose, but somehow there's. . . . That's kind of the way the Park pictures were set up. Now in his class I did this.

SL: Um hmm, which is really. . . .

RD: It's really Baziotes-related. And this is the kind of thing that I was sort of struggling with in the service. But at this time it has a little. . . .

SL: That's a more Cubist, purely Cubist look.

RD: Right. Yeah. So, yeah, I just admired immensely. He was just so astute and, well, he was just a grand artist. So. . . .

SL: So there you were in, snowbound, painting away.

RD: . . . started struggling away in a real vacuum, quiet, snowbound in this. . . . (laughs) But everything was very quiet. And so then our money ran out after nine months and we, there was just nothing to do but get in the car and come home. And so shortly after that, I went back to the school. And this was a little hard for me, because things had really happened. While I was gone, things had really happened at the school. Clyfford Still had come. And I was perhaps one of the very first G.I. Bill people at the school. There were, you could count them on one hand when I was first a student in early '46, I think. But by the time I got back, after this year of being, year away, it was predominantly G.I. Bill. And really quite a marvelous activity. And there's a painter named John Grillo--he's still on the scene; I see his name occasionally--who, oh, was one of my friends before I left the school, and. . . .

SL: Were you like a group around Park? Were you close and was there camaraderie and that sort of stuff?

RD: Uhh, yeah, um hmm. Which I think was sort of broken up when Still came. And for other reasons, things just got turned over and the place became much more active and Abstract Expressionism caught on and Park was a little bit left out at that point, because these, the G.I. Bill people were rebellious and set to turn things over, and didn't paint where they were supposed to paint in the school, and, you know, they were painting out in the halls and somebody was making tar effigies out behind the school, and it was pretty chaotic.

SL: When Still came, was he kind of a fellow teacher, or was he a special kind of presence, or did he fit in, or. . . ?

RD: Well, Doug McAgy brought him to the school, and he was the honored top man, the primary teacher.

SL: Was he much of a teacher?

RD: Umm, well, in a, not in the way that David was. David would talk about what you had, what you were doing, and had marvelous insights as to how to break down this block and just how to move, and it was a real--a real born teacher. Still--I was never in one of his classes, but I got the message from all of my friends who were--and he never talked specifically about painting, something that one was working on; he made broad pronouncements, and it was mostly attitude--and you know the whole Still.

SL: Yes.



RD: Yes, so this was essentially what he presented and he just inspired these guys and steamed them up and. . . . So, he was responsible for the. . . . There were other people that McAgy brought in. There was a photographer named Peterson. And then he had visitors. He had, Rothko came, and. . .

SL: Rothko came. Did you have contact with him when he came?

RD: Yeah. Well, I hadn't. . . . Oh, I had met Rothko in. . . . Well, this was a couple years after I had been teaching there, I think, that Rothko made his. . . . Or maybe he made his first visit right away. At any rate, I had met. . . . Oh, how the heck did it go? No, wait a minute. I'm wondering if I met Rothko on my second trip back to New York.

SL: And I should know this.

RD: No, let's see. I'm sorry; it was the first. But I guess I must have met him at the school, because I went to where he was hanging an exhibition, his work. And he was glad to see me, and so I did know him. And I helped him hang the show. So then, when he came back for what was to have been, what was a summer's tour there. . . . I got the mumps and I never saw him. (laughs)

SL: Oh, that's too bad.

RD: I saw him the first day, and then I came down with the mumps. I think my children had gotten the mumps and passed them on to me. And I had a severe dose of them so I was. . . .

SL: Was he easier to communicate with than Still?

RD: Yeah, yeah.

SL: More sharing of his. . . .

RD: Yes. [hesitant--Ed.] At first, when I first knew him. And then I guess the last time I met him, which was after this period that we're talking about, he had changed. He seemed, he seemed to have taken on a lot of the Still attitudes, and there was a paranoia that he had. And I guess the next time I saw him was in New York and I met him on the street. Happily talked and I said, well, "I'd just love to visit your studio, if you can, if there is a time when I could, because I'd sort of like to see what you're doing." And he looked at me and his eyes got bigger and, suddenly serious, [totally] serious face, and he said, "Well, we'll see about that." He did ask me to his house. I never went to his studio. But it was like. . . . There was the paranoia. There were people that were, that might, you know, take away some. . . .

SL: Uh huh, there's something secret to be guarded.

RD: . . . things of his. Yeah.

SL: It's intriguing, well, that sounds very paradoxical to me, because his basic format didn't change a lot, and the sensibility was really his own, so it wasn't. . . . I mean, it was so much based on a particular sensibility that it's not an idea that you can walk out the door with.

RD: No, no. But I have heard that he--from other people who know him--that he was very secretive about the, his medium of painting, how he would mix his paints.

SL: Ah, I see.

RD: Maybe he had a, this trusted guy, Bill Sharp, do it later on, but for years he mixed his own, and no one was there that he. . . . That was in a separate room and there was no indication of what Rothko mixed up to, in his paint. But he was that way about his ideas too.

SL: But there was. . . .

RD: When I first knew him, of course he wasn't, the Rothko [slip of the tongue? Probably meant Still-Ed.] format hadn't arrived yet, although there were. . . .

[Tape 3, side B]

SL: Slow Swirl, a wonderful painting, was in San Francisco?

RD: Yeah. And it seems to me it's divided in \_\_\_\_\_. \_\_\_\_\_ there.

SL: Um hmm. \_\_\_\_\_.

RD: Yeah.

SL: That was the painting that you found interesting?

RD: Yes, yes. Very much so. I just was just so disappointed when the man who was director of the museum briefly, sold it--or traded it back to Rothko for. . . .

SL: That was such a deal! (both chuckle) Rothko took him on that one.

RD: He certainly did.

SL: Oh boy.

RD: And didn't get, got a reasonable one, but. . . .

SL: He probably got a big later one for the smaller earlier one, which wasn't very small in the first place.

RD: It was smaller--much smaller than the, as I recall, than the Slow Swirl. And then, let's see, Baziotes visited the school, saw a bit of him, when he did. I didn't see too much of Still. I just was on speaking. . . . Never really talked with him.

SL: But meantime the Bay Area painters were doing something on their own, forming a so-called figurative, Bay Area figuration, at this point. Or was that somewhat later?

RD: Well, let's see. Let's get the times straight.

SL: Okay.

RD: After my Bender, when I was away, that would have been, I think I started teaching at the school in '47, in fall of '47.

SL: Right.

RD: Park and. . . . And then Elmer Bischoff had joined the faculty. This was when I came back from Woodstock.

SL: Yes.

RD: So it was not only Still on the scene, it was also Clay Spohn, Ed Corbett. But this activity had, that I described, had, had it's effect on David too. So they were all doing. . . . David was no longer doing the profiles. He was doing a very painty, very heavy and rather heavy-handed kind of abstraction. And you know the story of his destroying that work when he finally had had it with it. And it never seemed a great tragedy to me that he took those pictures to the dump because I really didn't think that that was his forte. He was not an abstract painter. Except in more of the sense that he was using the heads earlier. But he wasn't a nonobjective painter.

SL: Yes. There's a statement in here attributed to Bischoff, who said that he felt--I guess sort of in the late forties, early fifties--that there was already a strong feeling of self-sufficiency among that group of San Francisco painters.

RD: Um hmm.

SL: Some sense of their own identity, even in the midst of the stimulation and the interest in the famous visitors from New York.

RD: Oh yes. Um hmm, yeah. Oh, it had to. . . . It was not, by any means, an emulation of New York. It was paralleling, paralleled what was starting up in New York.

SL: Right.

RD: Preceded in some ways a lot of what happened later in the early fifties in New York.

SL: Could you expand on that a little bit?

RD: On. . . .

SL: On how that may be related to what was going in the early fifties.

RD: Well, that. . . . I think it was two very different locations or environments: physically, culturally almost (chuckles), who were both responding to this same thing that I was trying to describe earlier that was in the air. This new, you said. . . .

SL: Bay Area School.

RD: . . . American kind of. . . . Sometimes words just don't come along. But at any rate. . . .

SL: The way they synthesize and put things together, the ingredients form in a different way. I mean, they. . . .

RD: Um hmm, so here was this bit going on in, mainly centered in the art school in San Francisco. I don't think it was shared really elsewhere in the Bay area, and certainly not in Los Angeles.

SL: Well, by this time the term "action painting" was pretty well established in New York? And did you feel an affinity with that idea? Or was that. . . .

RD: Well, sure. Because although there were strong differences in character between the work done on the coast and in New York, it was, the impetus was essentially the same, this idea, this. . . .

SL: It seemed that. . . .

RD: And so, right away, comparisons were being made. And Germaine McAgy, the wife of Douglas, was a curator at the Legion of Honor, and she knew, as Doug did, these New York painters, and she brought their work to the Legion, and so the Legion briefly became something that it had never been and hasn't been since--a place where one saw the most advanced art. When I returned from Woodstock, this is where I went to see Clyfford Still; it was a Clyfford Still exhibition there. Large show that she had, and then she had several annuals of the advanced, of advanced painting from New York. So there was, it wasn't as though these two places simply moved parallel without relation.

SL: Yes.

RD: There was lots of cross-fertilization, or--I think--New York ignored of course what was going on out here, but we out here were very interested in what was going on there. A minute ago we were, I was trying to get the time straight. I forget exactly. . . . I had another grant, a fellowship. No that was later. Oh, I know. I taught at the school from '47, and then I resigned late in '49. Left San Francisco with Phyllis and our kids and dog, went to Albuquerque. And I want to get these things straight, because these mark. . . . There was no figurative work being done by any of these people up to this time.

SL: At that point, okay.

RD: It all happened when I was in Albuquerque.

SL: Ah hah.

RD: And that was when Ed Corbett was fired; Hassel Smith at the same time, was fired.

SL: Was that why you decided to leave? You felt that. . . .

RD: Well, I think that. . . . Complicated why I left. For one thing, I think I could sort of sense that it wasn't long for me, or a few of us who weren't in the top echelon at the school; it wasn't going to be long for us there. Also with so much that had gone and was being done, there was a kind of, in a sense, certain things were acceptable, certain things were out, and it was, like there was a way. You in some sense towed a line, and this bugged me a little bit. I wanted to get away and look at it by myself and do my own assimilation, and so, that was another reason for going to Albuquerque.

SL: You were going maybe in one direction, and it was growing in another and the split was. . . .

RD: Possibly, yeah. I was very taken, at the time, by Hassel Smith's work in 1949--marvelous work, the best I think that he. . . . He hardly ever matched that later on, a couple of places. Did you see that last show at the San Francisco museum?

SL: No, I haven't.

RD: Oh, there's this early sixties painting that matches the '49 work. At any rate, I was, we became friends, and in fact we painted a big canvas together in his studio. He would be there one afternoon, when I was teaching, and then we had different schedules, and I'd come into his studio and work on this painting. [They] were kind of fun to do.

SL: He seemed to, [the one's I've seen] seem to have this wonderful lightness of touch that was just exuberant.

RD: Oh yeah. Well, these were, these had the exuberance, but they were heavy. They were massive and, but they were really. . . . They were very powerful pictures, I thought. And I guess he was eight years or so older than I was. But at any rate, I was feeling like I was, that this wasn't good. I wanted to get away from. . . .

SL: Did you have. . . .

RD: I felt really influenced by this, and I wanted to get away from that.

SL: You had, I believe, in 1948 a one-man show at the Palace of the Legion of Honor, right?

RD: Yeah, um hmm.

SL: How did that come about, and was it a big show or a small show?

RD: Well, that was through Germaine McAgy. And it was, the museum and the school were all hand in glove, because Doug. . . .

SL: Was that your first one-man show?

RD: And so most of the people on the faculty were given, David was given a show earlier, the profile pictures. And then I was given a show. And here I was the lowly instructor and this was a great surprise to me that I was offered this exhibition, but I was. So that was a great stroke of fortune.

SL: Yes. And how did, how was your work received at that point? Did you feel a climate of support or. . . .

RD: I was going to say something earlier about. . . . When I came back to the school after working snowbound in Woodstock, I brought work to show. I remember I spoke of John Grillo, who I had thought was a very talented guy, and we had sort of worked in the same room and showed our paintings to one another. And we had a, we were really quite simpatico. Well, then. . . . And I felt he thought very highly of my work. And I came back and I remember, well, I wanted to show my pictures--they were all small little pictures--and I wanted to show these things to David and Grillo, and some of the people. And so I remember walking into the school, and I had this portfolio with about twenty of these little panels, and then here I look at the school and the pictures are massive size, and the, and so physical and broadly painted, and, well! And I can remember showing these things to Grillo, to John, and I could see, you know, he was being very polite, but he was thinking, "Oh, this is the guy I thought was so good, and, you know, doing these. . . ."

SL: Were they becoming more geometric or more controlled, or. . . .

RD: Well, there was. . . . [searching through book--Ed.]

SL: This type?

RD: Yeah, I was, I had loosened up a little bit to do that, but, let's see. . . .

SL: I think I can. . . .

RD: I don't. . . . No, maybe this, maybe I had done that.

SL: Um hmm.

RD: But this is a very small picture. This I think is a little earlier. There really aren't any of those that I brought back from Woodstock illustrated here.

SL: Um hmm.

RD: This may have been. . . . This is what the work looked like in '48 in the, or there were works rather like that in the [one-man show--Ed.].

SL: Which is in blacks and kind of siennas and yellows, white.

RD: Yeah, uh huh.

SL: And things that were being done, were they much more field oriented already? Broad and. . . .

RD: Umm, yeah. But very spontaneous and very loose and extravagantly painted. House paint, and big brushes, and no equivocation, no problem-solving, no. . . .

SL: What did you think about that?

RD: Oh, I was, my first response was, "Oh my god! I've been [a] hermit, I've been away from the world where things are happening," you know. It was very exciting, but at the same time it was, made me very uncomfortable because I had this stuff under my arm that I wasn't going to bring out in the presence of this really advanced art. (laughs) I mean, this really vigorous stuff.

SL: It's very interesting, in that sometimes when you're all by yourself some of your real essence comes out.

RD: Um hmm.

SL: But the problem-solving, thoughtful considered aspect of. . . .

RD: Oh sure, yeah, and you don't have the thing that's going around, going on around you to sort of spirit you over any blocks. You've just got to get through those stone walls by yourself, and. . . . Whereas at school. . . . Hey, Bruce! [dog--Ed.]

SL: I don't mind it.

RD: Is that all right?

SL: Sure.

RD: She'll lie down, I think.

SL: Yes.

RD: I lost my train of thought there.

SL: Just the marked contrast between your. . . . So then where did you go from there, in your work?

RD: Well, now this, these works, these pictures, this. . . .

SL: These are the Albuquerque paintings, hmm?

RD: This isn't '49?

SL: That's. . . . I think these are; these start the Albuquerque paintings. Fourteen, fifteen. Oh, I'm looking at \_\_\_\_\_ figure. This was a confusing catalogue in some regards. . . .

RD: Yes, it's really hard to find things.

SL: . . . because of the difference between figure numbers and the paintings. Oh yeah. They're double-entered; that's why we're having trouble here.

RD: Yeah.

SL: Sixteen, seventeen. This is '49, yeah. [numbers 16 and 17, both untitled, 1949--Ed.]

RD: Yeah, and so is this. This I did before I went to Albuquerque. And clearly a lot of Still has come off into that, and then. . . .

SL: For this \_\_\_\_\_.

RD: . . . and then a bit more on my own in this. [number 19, untitled, 1950--Ed.]

SL: Yes, this is very, this is much more open than kind of closed aspect here.

RD: Yeah.

SL: This is more calligraphic too.

RD: Ah hah!

SL: As though you're getting ready for a, this next area where you start working on. . . .

RD: Yeah, yeah. It doesn't matter. I was just wondering if that's '49, or whether that's Albuquerque, but I don't see, I think it must be '49, before I went.

SL: It is '49. So these. . . . And yet these two have a built sense about them. . . .

RD: Um hmm.

SL: I see that they're constructed. They're not tachism or just a brushstroke moving across the surface.

RD: Yes. Yeah. But there's a lot of that influence there, nevertheless. So then, I hadn't finished up at Stanford, but I, it was simply a matter of writing to them and I had credits accumulated for being in the service, for having taught at the art school and all that, so I came out with more than enough to graduate, and so they mailed me a degree. And so then I could go to the University of New Mexico as [a] graduate student, so that's what I did.

SL: Back to being a student again?

RD: Yeah.

SL: That's interesting how that happened.

RD: Yeah, after being a teacher for three years.

SL: Why there? What was there?

RD: Well, I think I just loved that country. I'd been through it twice--once on the train, once driving--and it was just an area that was just very compelling to me. And so, I applied there. And was, as I told you, dog, children, loaded car. . . .

SL: By this time you had two children?

RD: Yeah. And, oh gosh. . . .

SL: My goodness, what an adventure! (laughter)

RD: We got to Albuquerque, and it was not the place it was not the place it is now; it was really a cow town. Real raw. . . .

SL: Did you go for the landscape?

RD: Huh?

SL: You went, did you go there to study with someone specifically, or because of the landscape?

RD: No. I didn't know who was there. I had no idea. I just, University of New Mexico was the school, and I debated briefly. I knew I wanted New Mexico. There was also a school in, not Santa Fe; it's. . . .

SL: Taos?

RD: Southwest. It's in New Mexico. Beautiful country, but a school with a smaller town, a little bit more isolated. Sorry, but I can't think of the name of the town.

SL: That's all right.

RD: It's still small. Well, that was the only debate I had in my mind. It was going to be New Mexico, and, but clearly it was going to be the University of New Mexico. So Phyllis and I arrived at the Hand Motel on the outskirts of town, and oh boy! was it a hairy place. (laughs)

SL: Oh my, after San Francisco. Did you wonder about the wisdom of that?

RD: So we. . . . We lived in Sausalito, so from Sausalito to the Hand Motel with broken-down rusting cars outside our door and. . . .

SL: Oh my.

RD: And so, well, we were there for a couple of weeks.

SL: Goodness. But you did beautiful paintings there. You did absolutely beautiful pivotal paintings there.

RD: Yeah, things really started to come together for me there. It was a very good situation for me, because there was none of this fear of painting, I mean, that I was involved with, there at all. It was a pretty cut and dried art school. People did proper still lifes, and so I arrived.



SL: What did they think?

RD: Well, I was somebody who, I was a little difficult to handle. The teachers didn't know quite what to do with me. I had been a teacher; they knew this. And here I was in. . . . [temporary dog ruckus--Ed.]

SL: Oooh.

RD: And then, so, to make a long story short, they gave me a studio, in a Quonset hut. And so I had, was almost never at the art department. The instructors would come to the Quonset hut, maybe once or twice in three months.

SL: My.

RD: Really, really left me alone.

SL: Did you, was there anyone who you felt close to or got to know?

RD: Well, I had a good relationship with Raymond Jonson.

SL: Oh, you did! That's fascinating.

RD: Yeah, yeah.

SL: \_\_\_\_\_ .

RD: And I visited his place fairly often and we would talk, and he was the only one who was really, had any kind of understanding of what I was doing.

SL: Um hmm. He was, his work is very different, but he was a very interesting person.

RD: Yeah.

SL: He was kind of, he was very mystical and involved with the landscape of the area.

RD: Exactly.

SL: Abstract painter, in a way.

RD: Uh huh. There was some relation to Kandinsky.

SL: He was somewhat theosophical I think.

RD: Um hmm.

SL: And there was. . . . Wasn't there a group surrounding him as well?

RD: Earlier. Earlier there was.

SL: In the thirties, right, yeah.

RD: By this time he was alone. And, but the university kind of set him up there, and then he had retired from teaching classes--although he would visit me in my Quonset hut occasionally. But mostly I visited him, and he had a really fine big house on the campus, modern house, fairly modern,

and his studio and all his immaculate studio situation--I think it was in his basement, in an ample basement in this place, but all beautiful, which didn't really impress me. I was used to a much different studio situation, kind of rough and tumble and dirty and \_\_\_\_\_. Still am.

SL: Well, his painting was very impeccable.

RD: Oh yes, oh yes.

SL: Sometimes it's very, it's just so.

RD: Yes, his studio was like an operating room.

SL: And those tiny little brush strokes.

RD: Everything, the colors in jars were all on the walls, a whole wall of colors in jars, and each one had its little carefully labeled and I'm sure filed and cross-filed. . . . (chuckles)

SL: He had ideas about color and music and things like that as well.

RD: Oh yes, oh yes.

SL: So you and Raymond Jonson talked. That is really quite remarkable.

RD: Yeah.

SL: He was probably the only person within a thousand miles. (chuckles)

RD: Yeah. There was another sympathetic man named Les Hawes; he was the head of the art department at the time. I liked him. And there was another rather impressive Austrian, a man named [Cachel, Kachel], who was a sculptor, who tried to be the force, and he would give lectures at night, and rather inspiring to, but not related to contemporary art, really. And really quite disdainful of what I represented and the new art that was, one was beginning to see in the magazines. This was, and what occasionally some student would bring into class.

SL: Oh.

RD: This was appalling, and he would talk about Michelangelo and the art spirit, and he. . . . But, he was an intelligent man. He knew what he was talking about, and had considerable force in the, in the lectures at any rate. He was the only one on the small faculty who really had very little to do with me. I don't think he ever visited my studio. I was something else. So then, I guess that sort of gets us up to a point and we can carry on from there.

SL: Okay, sure. Maybe we could talk a little bit about those paintings next time too.

RD: Okay.

SL: About the Albuquerque paintings.

RD: All right.

SL: They're really special, they're wonderful things.

RD: Okay. Do you want to finish out the tape?

SL: No, it's okay.

## End Session 1

## Session 2

Interview with Richard Diebenkorn  
Conducted by Susan Larsen  
1985 May 2

Interview

[Tape 4, side A]

[Note: Side B not recorded]

SL: We are now in Santa Monica. And last time we had left off with your move to Albuquerque, I guess, as you recall, in 1950?

RD: Yeah. We, I was thinking about to move away from there.

SL: Yes, okay. I wanted to ask you if we could talk a little bit about the paintings that you made there and how you felt about them.

RD: Oh yes.

SL: They seemed to be a real breakthrough.

RD: I think that there was a breakthrough there. Possibly some six months after I arrived. It was a little slow at first as being in a new environment is for me. Not exactly slow, but things just didn't come together. And then suddenly they started to. And so I did quite a few pictures there. They're, primarily, they're kind of rather austere color: blacks, whites, ochres. There was something else I was going to say.

SL: Who, what. . . . Did you go out exploring when you were there? Did you go out looking at the Indian things or the landscape?

RD: Oh, a little bit, a little bit, and then later on when Ed Corbett moved there we went fishing and, you know, went up, that took us into the famous mountains and the Taos area and what not. So, I don't think I did much much before then, but we did little bits of. . . .

SL: Was there any interest in the pottery and the rugs and blankets and all of that?

RD: Well, I had been right along interested in the rugs. But the folklore thing is something that's easy for me to procrastinate. I tell myself I'm very interested and, but it doesn't prove out that way, really. So we never, the whole time we were there, the two-and-a-half years Phyllis and I were in Albuquerque, we never went to an Indian dance. We were always about to. I was going to say something further about the paintings. Oh, I know. About half of what I did there is lost, because Phyllis's stepfather had a ranch in Pomona, where, when we left Albuquerque just before going to Urbana, we stayed there for almost a month, or over a month. We took all our belongings with us from Albuquerque, and I had several rolls of canvases. And canvas, everything I did I rolled up, tubes. And two of those tubes just disappeared. I think I had stored them in a barn on the ranch, and when

we left I just forgot to take them. And then Phyllis's stepfather died and the ranch was sold and so . . . whatever happened to the pictures.

SL: And they just disappeared.

RD: Some of them are illustrated in that. . . . I had photographs, so some of them are in that catalogue that we looked at yesterday.

SL: My goodness. Any, it would be interesting to. . . .

RD: There's one in particular I really wish I had packed.

SL: It's not this one. . . . [looking through catalogue--Ed.]

RD: No, no.

SL: . . . because this was one in the show.

RD: Yeah. [pause] Some of the ones I liked less survived. This is gone.

SL: Oh my, what a shame. That one seems to have a, almost. . . .

RD: This is lost. This is lost. [chuckles]

SL: Oh no! [pause]

RD: I think that one the University of New Mexico took as a thesis.

SL: Is this the image of a cow? Or something like that?

RD: Yeah, it has, had a. . . . Some of that animal imagery came about because we. . . . For the first year in Albuquerque we lived in caretaker's small cottage on a kind of estate ranch on the outskirts of Albuquerque. It was right on the Rio Grande, on the west side of town. And surrounding us were. . . . Our cottage had a little picket fence around it, had a big ditch behind. And then there was pasture. We were surrounded on three sides by horse pasture and sometimes cattle. So we might. . . .

SL: Not yours, though. Someone else's?

RD: Well, it belonged to the ranch. They raised both cattle and horses, so we might get up in the morning and go outside and find our house surrounded by animals. This was fun for the kids. Oh, and then another event there that related to some of the imagery: we went to a state fair in Albuquerque. And this was a total animal thing, and I just never, never [had] seen prize pigs and their humanoid aspects. They looked like big, hairy, fat men (laughter) sitting around with the, their. . . .

SL: They say they're very smart too.

RD: Oh, they're smart; pigs are smart, yeah. Yeah, and. . . .

SL: Did you like the country? Did you ever want to really live in the country always, for ever and ever?

RD: Oh, I don't think so, no. And Albuquerque was, I guess, my period of reclusiveness--although we had good friends there and it wasn't as though we were, I was a recluse. But we were estranged from the kind of thing we had been used to in San Francisco. In Albuquerque movies, good movies, just cowboy pictures then, in Albuquerque. And there was a little music on campus; there were concerts. But by and large we felt kind of isolated, and . . . .

SL: Many of the . . . . The writing and articles on your work at that time talks about how it gained in scale, in the sense, not this overall size of painting, but the space inside the paintings.

RD: Sense of scale.

SL: Yeah.

RD: I think that has a lot to do with the Southwest, because the scale is, there is something that really is kind of overwhelming and most immediately apparent [when] one is there, I think. Do you agree?

SL: Yes and, though, it seems that from that point forward--and maybe even before that--your painting has a type of perceived scale, a perceived sense of much space and much air and that is truly maybe the central mystery of what you--at least for some of us--of what you've accomplished.

RD: Oh.

SL: Is that kind of thrilling sense of ample space and something very large and something quite well put together.

RD: Uh huh. Well, I think that is primarily from the physicality of New Mexico.

SL: The way that something of a modest size could seem so very large, and . . . .

RD: Um hmm. Actually the sky is no larger in Albuquerque than here.

SL: That's true.

RD: And yet it seems immense there. And Phyllis and I both had thought, well, we couldn't really live away from the water, the sea, too long, very long, so that was the apprehension when we moved back there, that there'd be no ocean. And well, the sky took the place of the ocean.

SL: Interesting.

RD: But then Urbana was truly a place without (laughter), without ocean.

SL: Okay. Move on to that. You went in the fall of 1952?

RD: Yeah.

SL: To teach?

RD: Yeah, uh huh.

SL: And this was the University of Illinois. I've been there; I kind of know what it looks like.

RD: Um hmm.

SL: I gather that it was not an immediate thrill when you first saw it?

RD: Well, I had positive responses to real mid-America college town, with elms and kind of gemütlich social thing. We were, we lived in Urbana, not in Champaign. We lived in a house like anybody else on the faculty, in one of those houses on those Midwest streets, and we had a professor of, in the music department living next door--and there's a strong music program--so we were, twice a week go to concerts. Something neither my wife nor me had had in our lives was the kind of Christmas that they have there. And it's, and there is snow and people go around caroling and that was. . . .

SL: Oh yes, very nice.

RD: You know, that's nice. And we would go around with Professor Fletcher and his kids. We saw quite a bit of them. And we met, through them, we met a man who was attached to the physics department and his wife who was a painter. And they became our really--I was going to say life-long friends--but things didn't quite happen that way. She was, the name was Klostler. She was an extraordinarily elegant woman. She was German, moved to Austria, and I guess it was in Vienna that she met Henry Klostler. He was initially a radiologist and then moved into physics, and was a Jew, and she was not, and she went with him, left in the really terrible times, and they lived in Albania for a year, and then finally were able to get to Portugal and they came to this country. Here I'm rambling again.

SL: Oh, that's okay.

RD: This, but this is a significant person in our lives. Gertrude--the woman--was. . . . I think if I didn't know her so well and loved her so, I might have dismissed the work as being a little craftsy, a little bit decorative. It was a little bit. But it was also very knowing and elegant and. . . . Well, we left then. We saw them almost weekly. He was, he was one of these people who is very important in his profession and his discipline, his calling, and yet extremely quiet, shy retiring--absolutely low profile. So he actually was a famous physicist, and he wrote a book called Information Theory. Presented it to me, with a little inscription. I couldn't read the first paragraph. (laughter)

SL: Aah.

RD: And it was mostly numbers and symbols and a whole 300-page book of absolute undecipherable. . . .

SL: Yeah. But they were lovely to be in your life, to have around?

RD: Oh, absolutely. They were just terrific people. So we kept up with them through the years. They visited us in Berkeley later on. And then Gertrude--I forget just what it was; it was a kind of cancer-related thing--and we knew that she didn't have too long. And one evening we got a call from Henry. Oh, he left Urbana and went to Brookhaven, on Long Island. He headed some program there, and we visited them on Long Island. But then this is later: we received a telephone call from Henry, who said, "Gertrude has just died, and I'm going to follow her. So, that was the end of the Klostlers for us.

SL: Oh my. Oh no.

RD: So. . . . Well, I tell about them and then I can't go on to really describe what they meant to my thinking, to my work. I can only say that a relationship like that is very, very important to one.

SL: Um hmm. So the people in, so the people then were very. . . .

RD: What?

SL: Certain people were very interesting and it brought them into your life?

RD: Oh yes. And then there were others there, there were others in the music department and. . . .

SL: Who was in the art department? (laughter) Or was that not important?

RD: There was a man named Bailey who was emeritus. He was, except for a couple of instructors that I saw, he was the only one who I really had much to do with. He had been a rebel in the department all through the years, and was a good painter, and there were some of the others who were simply career-oriented and did the ladder in that terrible backbiting way. It was really, a lot of it was pretty ugly, what. . . . And here I was this lowly instructor watching this. . . .

SL: What was going on.

RD: . . . combat, which was deadly and ferocious, and so that was how it was in the art department.

SL: When. . . . Maybe we could talk a little bit about when you were teaching, how you felt about, what you hoped and wanted to do in your classroom with your students? What your goals or, were as a teacher. Did you have any?

RD: My, the classes that no one wanted were the ones that the lowliest of the instructors got, and so I found myself teaching drawing and painting to architects. The school of architecture at Ubrana had a requirement that their freshmen--and sophomore, I think--take one art course. So there was, there were two--one professor, one assistant professor--who ran this program for the architects. And they prescribed absolutely what was presented, week by week, what one covered. And what it was, was totally a discipline, that really can't hurt anyone, but the discipline of drawing and painting from looking with absolute precision, and. . . .

SL: So it didn't leave you much room then for your own initiative?

RD: Well, I made it. That was. . . . (laughter)

SL: That's great.

RD: So that it was. . . . It was a kind of rendering in charcoal or conte crayon and that. . . . We would then judge the students periodically, the three instructors and the two professors who ran the program. I think three times during the semester, on an evening we would get together and go through each person's, each of the three instructor's work, and grade it.

SL: Oh.

RD: So we'd look at piece after. . . . Here would be so and so's work, week after week.

SL: Would you be grading the students or grading each other? Or was that. . . .

RD: Grading the students.

SL: Students. Good.

RD: So we would average the grade. There were five voices, five grades given, and then an average taken.

SL: Goodness.

RD: Well, in my teaching, what I right away found, was that--which one would expect really--among these budding architects in each class there was, there were usually three to four people who really were putting something into these drawings. You could just, they were doing the discipline just like the other guys. Other guys were cold and good A's. Maybe some of the D's and C's were somehow getting something else, and then maybe even some of the ones that they would say in the judgments, D, F, maybe, I would feel about those people that would kind of panic because they couldn't do this kind of thing that the A. . . . So they would summon up something else (laughter), and this would be so much more, so much stronger than the guys that were doing what they were supposed to do.

SL: Maybe then they went off in another direction. They weren't meant to be architects.

RD: Maybe so. It's hard to tell what happened to any of them. Maybe they were some pretty strong architects.

SL: Maybe those are. . . . Yeah. Maybe those were the ones who. . . .

RD: But at any rate, it was a really losing game because I began finding, you know, if I would encourage this other thing in the drawing--which I found myself doing with some of them, because they were kind of up against it. The architecture course was a really difficult one, and so this, they had to get good grades here and they were in. . . . But then some of these people I would encourage and I kind of let them know how I felt about what they were doing here, and how to enhance this and. . . . But then, it was losing game, because then we'd sit in these. . . . I forget what these grading sessions were called; it was some funny euphemism for. . . .

SL: Critique, or something like that?

RD: . . . chopping these people. Yeah, it was that French word, critique, critique, that was. . . . It's a word that they use in French schools for exactly that, a critique. But at any rate, the losing thing was that I'd find these people that I had pushed in a certain way, I was pushing them from a C to a D and, well, that was very bad of me. So I was uncomfortable about. . . .

SL: Yes.

RD: . . . about how things were going there, and there was absolutely no moving either of these professors, and rightfully so. The architecture department said we want these people to learn to render and do so accurately and elegantly and so the two professors were following the prescription.

SL: So in your own work you were able to, though, to work quite profitably there, it seems.

RD: Yeah, um hmm.

SL: And those were, that was a lovely period, and. . . .

RD: Um hmm, I had a studio and bedrooms and. . . .

SL: Did you have any upper story rooms that you could convert to a studio?

RD: In both, we lived in two houses while we were there, same neighborhood, and both studios were



just fine: large, ample, \_\_\_\_\_.

SL: In some of the paintings you made then, people have remarked about semi-figurative developments and sort of marvelously meandering lines in the Urbana paintings.

[Interruption in taping? Sound quality deteriorates some for at least a while.]

SL: Do you feel the painting Archer was this, in this period?

RD: Well, that is, yeah, that was the only one that was intentionally representational. It does. . . . I have it here in the next room, actually. It does represent the archer. The rest, nothing else does.

SL: Not specifically?

RD: Hmm? No. They're forms that I brought from, with me from Albuquerque, mainly. But in Urbana the color things kind of came forth. In Albuquerque it was, as I said before, subdued, austere, black, gray, white.

SL: Now the greens and yellows and oranges.

RD: Um hmm. And I don't really, I don't know quite how to explain that. It's just something that a very different kind of environment produced. It's, actually, it's the same way with Ocean Park paintings. I never tried to work in terms of this coastal light, ambiance, and yet people assume I do. There have been reviews that refer to rather specific things on the beach--hotdog stand or something like that--and I'm just making paintings, and this environment has produced such and such a look and feel. The paintings in Berkeley were much stronger in color, as maybe you have realized.

SL: Um hmm.

RD: The color down here is a little bit drained, a little bit grays often.

SL: Well, the light coming in this room, studio, too has a very special quality.

RD: Um hmm, um hmm.

SL: It's hard to put into words, but it's. . . .

RD: It certainly is. I really don't know about the light of the place until I've worked in that place for some time. And then I can tell you about the light looking at the paintings. But I guess I don't understand people when they will come to a place and they'll say, "Oh, this is a real painter's light here. This is marvelous." Well, it seems like a grand light to me, but I don't see how it's that different from 50 miles away, or. . . . Except then I, but the way I can tell is in terms of work.

SL: What shows up in your own work?

RD: Um hmm.

SL: Do you look for a place to work, then, a space to work in that. . . . Are you very, very concerned about the gradient and quality of the light or a certain feeling?

RD: The only thing I require in a studio is daylight, and coming from a direction where I don't get direct light, which really destroys things with the strong light that comes in. And also a light situation where I can somehow work without reflection on the surface of the canvas, and beyond that, I just

accept the light of the. . . . If it's a good painting space, well, the light that goes along with it.

SL: That's interesting. Because. . . . Of course, even in this neighborhood, there have been people who've made the whole light and space phenomenon of California artists. . . .

RD: Oh yeah, there's Jim Turrell and the. . . .

SL: [Robert] Irwin and [Maria] Nordman.

RD: . . . who lives two blocks down.

SL: It's just a different awareness, do you think?

RD: Different awareness?

SL: Or not?

RD: [pauses] Well, sure. Very different. But exactly how and. . . . I beg that question.

SL: Yeah. Somehow interesting that those, that would come up strong. . . .

[Tape 4, side B, not recorded]

End Tape 4

[Tape 5, side A]

[Note: Side B not recorded]

RD: . . . and made arrangements for the show and, which I guess was early in 1956. It was my first show with Ellie [Poindexter--Ed.], but it was showing of the abstract painting. Something else, I. . . . The Guggenheim had a show. . . .

SL: Yes, I have a note on it. James Johnson Sweeney organized Younger American Painters.

RD: Younger American. . . . Yeah.

SL: At the [Guggenheim].

RD: And that was another thing that Ellie Poindexter drew on, from having seen my piece in that show.

SL: Um hmm. And did Sweeney come out to see your work, or did he pick it from things he knew in New York?

RD: I think he just asked me to send a piece.

SL: That's nice.

RD: I didn't meet him until later, Sweeney until later. Where was I in the. . . . Oh, in, well, at this time I learned a kind of lesson about, for me, about my relationship to agent, dealer. I found myself with three dealers. And [Paul] was very miffed that I should go with Ellie. And did a lot of reasoning with him, and of course the, it's the marketplace, and that's where your work is really seen, and so there

was a kind of strain in our relationship there. And I didn't do anything further with Frumkin because, well, I realized that I, my, I'm not that prolific a painter and I just can't divide up a year's work; it just doesn't work. How do you do that? You just, if you have a show out here and one out there in New York, well. . . .

SL: More than enough, huh?

RD: . . . both shows, both exhibitions are weak for, weaker for what's taken to the other one. So since then I've been very careful to just have one dealer.

SL: What is--just my opinion, which probably doesn't belong on tape--but it seems that there have been quite a number of very talented people here on the west coast who have west coast dealers and never have an east coast dealer. And that it doesn't help the growth of their own career.

RD: It doesn't. . . .

SL: It doesn't. . . . The dealers, if the dealer here does not promote his best people back east, that they never go beyond a regional thing. . . .

RD: Um hmm.

SL: . . . and that some of them aren't willing to do that.

RD: Some of the dealers?

SL: Yeah. That they're too afraid of. . . .

RD: Maybe that's. . . . That's possible.

SL: Not maybe realizing that the only way that person really can have a national career is to show nationally.

RD: Um hmm. I haven't thought that it might actually be a conspiracy on the part of the local dealer.

SL: I always felt that maybe what you're saying makes a lot of sense, because I always thought that everyone would be better off, if this person got the full chance that they deserve. That the person who represents them here would have a more major artist to represent, if they took care that the most was done with that person.

RD: Um hmm, sure. But of course the dealer here then has to face splitting commissions and. . . .

SL: I guess so, but it's a much. . . . Well, anyway, it's a shame, in a way.

RD: It is, sure.

SL: Because it's something that a New York-based artist might not have to even think about or worry about.

RD: Um hmm, right.

SL: But it's just, one can go so far and no further without that. It's a shame if that's cut off artificially.

RD: Yes. It most certainly is.

SL: Anyway, so you were in Berkeley and your painting started up again and they seemed to have once again some kind of coloristic and compositional thing that evolved into another place.

RD: Um hmm. I feel that I'm really, where it comes to describing the changes that take place in work, I'm really not doing that very well, and I'm sorry.

SL: Maybe I should be more helpful or something like that. You mentioned that they, you felt that they had become, the color had become more intense.

RD: Well, let's see. Now this work immediately followed Urbana. I think maybe the Urbana painting was the most saturated in color.

SL: Here's one. Here's one in '55. This would have been very early then, right?

RD: Well, at this time in Berkeley. . . . Actually, in '54 things really started to come together for me. It was really a pretty exciting time. In the evenings I listened to lots and lots of music, mostly Mozart. And I really felt that that music was feeding right into the work. It was nothing I tried to push or. . . .

SL: You were doing a concentrated listening to a lot of Mozart?

RD: Um hmm, yeah.

SL: Were you. . . .

RD: The literature, the recording thing. . . . Curiously, there wasn't that much recorded. There were a few of the big symphonies and maybe three of the late concertos, and there were, one could hear sonatas, but we were starting to get recordings from Europe and so there was just so much more to hear all of a sudden, [where] Mozart was concerned. And, well, so this was my excitement, away, outside of painting at that time.

SL: And you had a grant so that you didn't have to teach, at that point?

RD: Yeah, that was, that was, really saved my life, and that. . . .

SL: This was the Rosenberg fellowship?

RD: Yeah. That helped me a lot, and when I was on the arts council, national, NEA [National Endowment for the Arts--Ed.], later, and, I really knew what I wanted to push there in terms of grants because of my experience.

SL: What was that?

RD: Well, we were really broke, and I actually had arranged, I had made--I put in this application, but wasn't counting on anything coming through--and I had actually been to the taxicab company and was, in two weeks I was going to start (chuckles). And then the grant came through and so that was really a lifesaver. So my feeling about grants when I was on the council was that you don't try and put somebody, a few artists, make them instantly wealthy; that many, many grants and enough to tide somebody over in. . . . Because that's how it was with me. I just needed that tiding over at that time. But curiously enough, the grant idea hadn't, I mean, it wasn't anything new, but people thought that, a surprising number of people thought that the really strong, the few strong artists in the country should be rewarded by large grants, you know, like \$50,000 or something like that.

SL: Yes, I know. And often those are the people who are doing all right.

RD: Um hmm, sure, yeah. So that grant showed me a lot and I was eternally grateful for having gotten it. . . .

SL: You must have had a very hard time.

RD: . . . at that really crisis, crucial, time for me.

SL: You must have had a very supportive spouse, too.

RD: I'm sorry?

SL: You had a very supportive spouse.

RD: Oh yes, I do.

SL: And all these things you described were not easy on the family.

RD: No. But Berkeley was--is--a fine place to live, neighborhood--as opposed to New York City.

SL: Did you make use of the university community, the library and the music thing?

RD: I did, yeah, yeah. I did. I guess David [Parks--Ed.] joined the faculty in Berkeley in '57. Elmer [Bischoff--Ed.] joined it something like '59. And then I went back, I went back to teaching at the, first at California College of Arts and Crafts, taught there a year, and then when I went over to. . . . Well, I took a year off, after the Ellie [Poindexter--Ed.] show, I guess it was in 1958, that I, because I had done very well and I thought maybe I just didn't have to teach at all then--and I didn't, at that point. But I had at this time a studio at home in my backyard. And there was never any reason to leave the premises, you know, and this became suddenly lonely not teaching--or not doing something, not having some reason to go to San Francisco, or go anywhere. And I could just remember one morning looking out the window and watching these men on their way to the bus with their newspapers under their arms and envying them. (laughs)

SL: Oh! (laughs)

RD: They were going out into the world and I'm going to go shut myself up in the backyard. So, I went back to teaching right after; '58 was the only the year that I hadn't taught until I quit UCLA in '73, and so it was just a. . . .

SL: So you had a better experience, though, I would assume, with teaching, after the U of I?

RD: After. . . ?

SL: After the University of Illinois, you had more liberal teaching situations.

RD: Yeah, well, but they weren't university. . . .

SL: They were [more] art school?

RD: Art school, yeah.

SL: Did that fit better?

RD: Oh yes, much. Much more relaxed situation. And not enough in it for anybody, so that there wasn't the, all the competition and animosity--that, actually, is the teaching situation that I always preferred. And I had said to myself I'll never, never go. . . . I guess that was the reason I didn't go to, didn't accept UC Berkeley. And then it wasn't till in the mid-sixties that Fred Wight came up and persuaded me to come down to UCLA. And I guess I did that because I wanted to move to L.A. and I wanted a reason to come down here.

SL: Um hmm, gee.

RD: And my friend Bill Brice lived down here and I just thought it was time for a change.

SL: Well, could we go back a little bit to the fifties and then. . . .

RD: Sure! Yeah.

SL: Okay. I'll go make a little loop back to it.

RD: Yeah.

SL: In the early fifties, David Park had moved from being an abstract, basically an abstract painter, to doing figural work with abstract elements in it.

RD: He made his change in, I guess, it was 1951.

SL: Yes.

RD: Because I'm not a good correspondent; I didn't write to any of my friends, and I was in Albuquerque, and I told you I, it was isolated, and then Ed Corbett appeared. There'd been a big blowup at the school, and he'd been, he and Hassel [Smith--Ed.] and David, Elmer had been fired--or one of them. I guess Ed and Hassel were fired and then the others. . . .

SL: Said, "We don't want to be here if they're not here?"

RD: Yeah, yeah. It was a new director that nobody could get along with, and in this turmoil is when David abandoned nonobjective painting and he began painting direct, directly painting the figure, not just figurative elements.

SL: Yes.

RD: And so this was what, this was the news that Ed had from the home front, that. . . .

SL: What did you think of that?

RD: . . . David, "David Parks (sic), you know what he's doing?" And, "He's doing these kids on bikes," and. . . . (laughter)

SL: What did. . . .

RD: Well, he was very disdainful of this. So. . . .

SL: But soon there were others doing. . . .

RD: Well, not for a while, really. Of course there were. . . . I guess when I say "others weren't," I'm

talking about painters.

SL: Yes, uh huh.

RD: Sure a little bit of representational. I guess that sounds a little snobbish to me, when I say nobody was doing figurative painting, whereas most of the artists in San Francisco were. (chuckles)

SL: Were doing just that, huh.

RD: But I think David was really all alone. Well, there was Jim Weeks who never became an abstract painter. But his work was strongly influenced by. . . . He was a good friend of. . . . We saw a lot of Jim and so did Elmer and David. So that would be the exception, would be Jim. But David did something really quite radical at that time!

SL: Do you know what the, was there something that prompted it particularly, or. . . .

RD: I think. . . . He's made a very good, rather brief paragraph, a long paragraph of what prompted him to do this, and it would be something to read. For one thing--I told you earlier--I didn't think he was really a nonobjective painter. He required a specific human subject. This is what turned him on in painting, and I think he wasn't doing too well. It doesn't say that in his paragraph. I think that things really kind of stopped. . . .

SL: Yes.

RD: . . . and he felt that he was just going through the motions and it was the kind of--the word--the thing he involved with was this kind of, this very kind of style-oriented. . . .

SL: Sometimes in a period of crisis, too, people return to the tangible. I wondered if, it sounded like he was in a period of turmoil.

RD: Well, that's. . . . Uh huh.

SL: I don't know.

RD: That's very good, a contribution.

SL: Yeah, even someone like, following the two world wars, there was a return to figural, to the human figure on the part of very avant garde artists, many of [them].

RD: And then too, he had, and I'm sure, antipathy right along to what happened at the art school, the kind of explosion that took place. And here were suddenly these kids who were--even though rough and vigorous and--but were suave and. . . .

SL: Or facile, maybe?

RD: Yes! And it makes sense to me that David would just want to. . . . This wasn't really art to him, this wasn't really painting to him. He would be disdainful of improvisational painting, and. . . .

SL: Truly stylistic. . . .

RD: . . . he wasn't going to be on the stage in his studio and improvise.

SL: So when you came back to Berkeley, you renewed your contacts with Park and Bischoff and. . . .

RD: Um hmm.

SL: And did you, you met. . . .

RD: And by that time, Elmer had followed suit.

SL: Yes. You met to draw the figure, is that right?

RD: Excuse me?

SL: You met frequently and drew together?

RD: Yeah, uh huh. And the seeds of the (chuckles) of what was to happen to me were in that, in those figure-drawing sessions--and also in our. . . . They were the people I saw--all the time. And so it was kind of two against one. (laughter) These people were talking about their painting problems and. . . .

SL: Had you always been. . . .

RD: . . . \_\_\_\_\_ representation and the. . . . Hmm?

SL: No.

RD: . . . well, and figure and. . . . And then, I had never given representational painting a mature chance, I think, at the beginning, being unaware, as a student is. Of course I, as I have told you, it was representational. But I had never, as a painter, which I felt myself to be now, with certain awareness of what it was all about (chuckles) I felt that I wanted to take a shot at it, at representation.

SL: Had you continued to draw things in your sketchbook along with the abstract work?

RD: Not really.

SL: Because some people have done that.

RD: Oh maybe occasionally, yeah. But it was pretty strictly. . . . The drawing was in terms of concepts and . . . abstract painting. And I felt--I've said in someplace there that I felt that it was really square (chuckles) to work from subject matter, and that. . . . Of course, figure developments immediately destroys the abstract spatiality, and there's no "a little bit of this and a little bit of that." So, it was something I had stayed strictly away from, except in these drawing sessions at night. So I did that for years, drew at night with these people, and, which I enjoyed that actively. I would say it's kind mindless.

SL: And you had something of a community feeling at that point?

RD: Um hmm, yes. So then, I remember the day that I decided to change over to small canvas, pile of stuff on the table that looked sort of right to me, and I worked from that. I still have those pictures.

SL: Were they things, just like gathering the things around here, or was it something special?

RD: Like--and I, with the still life that I did after that, I always kind of liked the things fall, and never try and arrange anything.



SL: Um hmm. A statement that's in that book, you mentioned the difference between getting the object right and getting the object sitting right. I wonder if that rings a bell? The rendering of, I guess does it mean something, the rendering of the object correctly, or the placing of that object in the painting, and that that might be. . . .

RD: Well, I forget exactly what it stated there, what the statement was really about. It's, I guess, sitting right," I would be referring to the kind of balance, the relationship of forms, weights, spatially, surface-wise, and that kind of fitness that the picture wants to have, and in the case of still life, things then sit right. I think that's what I meant by that phrase. I don't know where the rendering of, what that has. . . .

SL: Well, I, that was my own [interpretation], maybe that's why.

RD: Oh.

SL: And this is something else attributed to you. "Meaningful symbols aren't invented as such; they are made or discovered later." There was much discussion about the scissors paintings. . . .

RD: Uh huh.

SL: . . . and the fruit and the various things that you began to paint at. . . .

RD: Well, I would certainly affirm what you. . . . I think I said that. (laughter)

SL: Maybe someone said that you said that.

RD: I know.

SL: Some of those paintings seem to involve objects that were in the painting almost the same size they were in actuality, some of those early small ones.

RD: Uh huh.

SL: Which seemed interesting, --maybe not--but that seemed interesting to me.

RD: I never really considered that.

SL: Maybe it's not true, but it seemed that in some of them. . . . I remember your retrospective, '77, this whole wall of modestly sized paintings, and they were often. . . .

RD: Scissors.

SL: And food. And they seemed to be close to what their tangible real-life scale was.

RD: Ah hah!

SL: And they seemed to be, not, there wasn't the kind 17th-century arrangement of things, where you had. . . .

RD: And no. . . .

SL: Or even the Cezannian clustering of this and that, but. . . .

RD: Um hmm, um hmm.

SL: . . . they seemed often to be not exactly adrift but somehow in an open space or in counterpoint to something else.

RD: Um hmm.

SL: And it gave them a curious intensity. . . .

RD: Ah hah.

SL: . . . by the fact that they were just. . . . Like here, here's this. . . . Like that.

RD: Uh huh.

SL: I'd have to look through it to find some more, but. . . .

RD: In this regard, not to try and answer your question, but with still life--and I was criticized by a couple of people in the first show of representational painting that I had in New York, the criticism being that I was an abstract painter and I was simply using these forms to hang my painting abstract ideas on, and essentially the forms that I used, even the figures, were pawns. And this, it really made me quite angry, because--and now I want to go back to the still life--almost always, except of course obviously the Scissors here and this didn't happen--but with a group of forms, they would be familiar things. There'd be an ink bottle or, and glasses and a pipe ashtray, cigarette butts, or, and some other thing, a jar of brushes or something like that. I'm describing this to kind of deny that criticism. I worked with this group of objects and I got to realize that in the process of painting I could find out which objects were real to me, were viable by whether or not they stayed in the picture. So that I worked with a lot of the same objects that consistently stayed.

SL: Yes.

RD: There were other objects that, as I worked with painting and it wouldn't work and I'd make alterations and adjustments, and finally I'd realize, "That bloody thing has to just leave!" (both chuckle) And so out it would go.

SL: Uh huh.

RD: But this tells me that these objects were terribly important. . . .

[Tape 5, side B, not recorded]

End Tape 5

[Tape 6, side A]

[Note: Side B not recorded]

RD: . . . and right along, that I'm not exactly resisting, but I, but some of your questions want to bring out something a little more theoretical, and I find that I . . . beg those questions a little bit, and I'm finding that I . . . Maybe it's just I'm lazy, or it's easier just to go in a, to deal with the facts and what happened and. . . .

SL: Well, sure. I'm trying to, as much as possible. . . . These are the kind of more abstract questions

that I think that the people who look at your work and people who write about it or think about it ask themselves.

RD: Um hmm.

SL: And that's, and if. . . . I thought it would be wonderful if, to have your thought about it because it, there'll be other people who will invent things to explain that.

RD: Sure, yeah.

SL: So whatever. . . .

RD: This is taped, isn't it?

SL: Yes.

RD: Okay.

SL: So whatever one has of your own thoughts on the subject is quite precious and important.

RD: Well, I'll try. I'll try and come up to some of those questions.

SL: But it's. . . . Sometimes it's. . . . Maybe the questions aren't well put and I should make them more specific or something. In any event, this cast of objects and landscapes and figures began to be in your work, and. . . . Were you working with it at home? Looking through the window?

RD: By this time I, let's see, I was, I had left my studio in the backyard that I'd built myself. I was in that studio about a year, and the isolation--I needed to, I think I wanted a bigger place--and so I found a good space in Berkeley, downtown Berkeley. And it was there that I painted in 1955, did all the work that I showed with Ellie in 1956. And it was the end of 1955, I guess, that I did the abstract--the picture of the landscape over there; it actually is the first one that I did. I said that the first one was a still life, but it wasn't. I went outside, and what I was, what I decided to do, or I know the impetus for the first one being a landscape. Essentially what I did was what I had done at Stanford, is get in the car and go out and look for something that looked like it might make a good painting. So. . . .

SL: Just as you had done in the. . . .

RD: So I got in the car and did that and I know right where I did it, and. . . .

SL: Did you make a sketch and then paint it in the studio, or. . . .

RD: No, I worked right from the canvas.

SL: Right on the canvas.

RD: Yeah, and I did it entirely on the spot.

SL: It doesn't line up with axis of the canvas, too, the horizontal one.

RD: Hmmm.

SL: You have a very stable vertical and horizontal and diagonal?

RD: Um hmm.

SL: It's quite reminiscent of the early work.

RD: Well, it does. It's not intentional, but it certainly does relate to the '55 paintings that I was, that I was doing.

SL: These are, this was a portable size, too, this one particularly.

RD: Yeah.

SL: With the little, small size so you could take it out, and do it.

RD: Yeah, um hmm.

SL: And as they grew in scale and. . . .

RD: Well, the larger things were done in the studio. So I guess after doing the, this landscape--and this probably all happened in a week--the landscape and several still lives--then I approached a big canvas with a figure.

SL: Uh huh. And now many of these do seem to have--at least it would seem--a certain gestural aspect of the way they're standing, and they don't look like made-up figures to me.

RD: Oh, lots of the figures, often the figures started with, from a sketch from the evening [session--Ed.]. And I just can't tell you which ones. Some of them stayed pretty much like the drawings. Others changed or got painted out completely once the painting was going, and I might just improvise the figure, invent it.

SL: Um hmm. Did it, did they begin with the figure? Or the context? Or did both grow simultaneously?

RD: I think they would grow simultaneously, yeah. And, but I never really, in terms of the outcome, I certainly, I don't think I ever started with what finally. . . . Or I would, often I'd start with the, it would happen this way: Where the figure would start as a figure and an interior, and then possibly there would be a window, and then pretty soon I'd take the wall away and reveal the rest of the landscape--or it might work in the reverse. The figure in the landscape would sort of bring about something like this.

SL: Oh.

RD: . . . which would become a figure [in the, and an] interior.

SL: And that. . . . It's often been said that the indoor-outdoor, the sense of someone being in a constructed space, sharing a landscape space, is not--not all of them are like that, but many of them are that way--there's something about the way we live or the way things are in that.

RD: [Or] possibly for me. I'm sure that that idea--it's certainly not my idea--but a figure in an interior. . . . Well, I'm repeating what you just said: this does symbolize a certain take on an individual in terms of his interior/exterior.

SL: It's also a marvelous pictorial device--Matisse, of course, used this.

RD: Um hmm!

SL: But it's also a marvelous pictorial device to gain one kind of light inside. . . .

RD: Oh yes, yes!

SL: . . . and another kind of light outside.

RD: Uh huh!

SL: And the contrast.

RD: Although I think Matisse for me is maybe--not always--but in a lot of his paintings, he is the exception to that rule. . . .

SL: Yes, he is.

RD: . . . where somehow he can make a consistent kind of indoor/ outdoor. . . . And there isn't the break between outdoor/indoor. . . .

SL: No.

RD: . . . except in the drawing and the idea.

SL: In that regard, it seems your paintings are much more linked to that light of the natural world.

RD: Yes, yes.

SL: In a very painterly way.

RD: Inside a room--for me, I can't think of the interior of a room sharing the kind of light that's outside that, that room. It would falsify everything for me.

SL: Um hmm. That's interesting. Where the Matisse often we. . . . He plays with the mystery of that, like he'll make the outside look more artificial than the inside, or. . . .

RD: Yes, and I guess it's. . . . Yeah. And it's the earlier painting which is really the traditional way of thinking about it, the way I think about it, which is the indoor light and the outdoor light. I guess it's in his later work that he starts to break down that, or he does break down that difference.

SL: Um hmm, the earlier work is in some way more austere than the later. It appeals so much to mind as well as the eye, it's such wonderful stuff. I wanted to ask too about--at least the ones I'm looking at here, tend to have a single figure, or maybe two, rather than groups of people.

RD: Um hmm.

SL: Is there any particular interest in that consistency?

RD: Well, I think. . . . I think that's personal symbolism, again. I often began with two, rarely three, figures. And I think I could count on my hand, one hand probably, the paintings where both figures survived. But somewhere in the process--for one reason or another, for painting reasons, or for psychological reasons or whatever--the process of losing. . . . I was going to say the process of losing the figure was gradual. Losing one of the figures--or maybe both of them. . . . But I remember

the first time it happened that I was working with a figure in an interior and the figure just was not compatible. I just couldn't see these two elements together, and so to, x, just wipe out, paint over that figure, and suddenly find that the still life, I mean, that the interior was on its own with somehow the presence of the figure still there being sort of alive and human with the traces of it, the, of that figure and what that figure had done to the interior in the process of trying to get it in a sympathetic relationship or in a relationship. That was very exciting to me, the first. . . .

SL: Well, here, this interior is so bright, and the figure seems so lost in her own space and thought.

RD: Um hmm.

SL: . . . that a person and the emotional thing that they throw off, and the, and space and color related but so different, it seems.

RD: Um hmm. That's from a picture. I know that the Tennis Sweater I felt that that was a kind of outrageous (chuckles) thing for the attitude of the figure. I. . . .

SL: I guess.

RD: There were several things I was trying to combine there, psychologically, the sort of funny outrageousness of the tennis sweater and. . . .

SL: How much did the psychology of these figures involve you?

RD: Well, really a lot. And ultimately a figure survived in terms of that, of the successful dealing with that psychology. So again, I think of that criticism which irritated me so about my figures being pawns. And as soon as I started using figures my whole idea of my painting changed. Maybe not in the most obvious structural sense, but these figures distorted my sense of interior or environment or the painting itself--in a way that I welcomed. Because you don't have this in abstract painting. They're really, there are very few. . . . Well, there are things that can do it, in abstract painting, but one doesn't have, isn't dealing with forms that have their, in a sense, their own existence. They aren't entities that leave you one. . . . In abstract painting one can't deal with a kind of entity, entity like an object or person, a concentration of psychology which a person is as opposed to what, where the figure isn't in the painting. So there isn't. . . . And that's the one thing that's always missing for me in abstract painting, that I don't have this kind of dialogue between something that can be, elements that can be wildly different and can be at war, in, or in extreme conflict.

SL: There's a whole dimension there of feeling that. . . .

RD: Yeah. So that's the thing that, that's the thing that I, the major sacrifice, for me, in doing abstract painting. Obviously there are other things that are, that weigh in. . . . So that I opt for abstract painting. But I sorely miss that one source of opposition, conflict.

SL: Yeah. That's. . . . There's a kind of large of embrace of land, space, ideas in abstract painting that's thrilling and satisfying, but in some ways a lack of specificity.

RD: Um hmm, and it runs with the whole theory of abstract painting.

SL: Um hmm, yes, it does.

RD: Abstract painting breaks down with, I think, with, well, an overdose of specificity. But. . . .

SL: You don't hear the dialogue.

RD: Well, I think of the Mondrian pictures of around 1914, with the gatherings of forms and the opening up and the sort of breathing. . . .

SL: Pier and ocean drawings. . . .

RD: But he can, this is about as far as he can go in achieving the kind of opposition of, between a contraction and an expansion, which is, well, a little bit like, relates to what we were just talking about, I think.

SL: Um hmm, you could see him start to create something large and in the Pier and ocean drawings how that forays out there. . . .

RD: Yes.

SL: . . . then it starts to broaden out into this cosmic thing, and then the parts become parts in the systemic whole, and the whole is quite wonderful.

RD: Um hmm.

SL: But those little movings and gatherings are very important to the space.

RD: And I think that in my abstract painting--I don't like to think that I have any formulas; I think some people think I do--but I gravitate to a--usually it's high in the space--concentration of forms that. . . . And it's, I guess it's, my explanation, although I haven't done that for these reasons, but my explanation of how this, what my [idea of this is, why I do this], is that this is the closest I can get, this concentration of forms, of small-scale elements, is as close I can get to something like a figure or something like an object that has its concentration as opposed to the larger, less-charged space on the other end.

SL: Um hmm, the field.

RD: The field, which would be comparable in figure-painting to the objects around the figure which have a much less, are much less concentrated in their psychology. And then one of the limits in figure-painting to me, I, there would have to be a limit to how closely I could deal with--with a head, say--which is such a concentration of nonpainting stuff, you know. (both chuckle)

SL: Um hmm.

RD: The clothes, or the hands a little less, and then of course the. . . .

SL: The faces will [vary accordingly]. . . .

RD: . . . chair and the rug less, and the wall none, or almost none. So a kind of hierarchy of importance as to the various elements of a picture, that's something that I've struggled to somehow bring into abstract painting. And. . . .

SL: They are very much interrelated. Things you learn in one way you apply in another way, or things you find satisfying in certain measure, hang on to. . . . Interesting. Very relevant to today's painting, too, and all the things going on.

RD: Um hmm.

SL: The why to, you know, why be a figurative painter, why be an abstract painter, \_\_\_\_\_ just that, you know, that's in vogue or out of vogue or whatever.

RD: Right.

SL: And they're always changing.

RD: And then I could never understand the people who would I'm sure honestly say--painters--would say that abstract and figure painting, or abstract and representational painting, it's all the same. And it is such a dichotomy for me.

SL: How about those who say only this or only that.

RD: Hmm?

SL: How about those who say only this or only that: only this kind of painting is serious, or only this kind of painting is relevant.

RD: Well, I guess I was guilty of that at one point, when I told you that I felt it was square to do--that representational painting was just out! (laughs) Abstract painting was the only, had the only relevance. Of course I don't feel that now at all. That it's really, it's a day-by-day decision, really, to remain in abstract painting or attempt representational painting again.

SL: But each time that change has occurred for you, that's been a big switch, big change, with accompanying. . . .

RD: Oh! I should say! The largest switch that can possibly in my work.

SL: It's a, everything [move] in a. . . .

RD: Because it's from end of the stick, way over here, to way over there, as far as I can go. And I'm aware also that this extreme dichotomy is, one invents at some time or other, or that. . . . So, I can conceive of somebody honestly believing that there isn't a difference. I don't think, in my generation, I don't think I've ever heard any painter in my generation say that there was no difference; it was younger painters.

SL: Or even the idea of doing both simultaneously. That seems like the whole accompanying mental and physical set of everything, of your whole support structure, has to take a big turn, to move in one direction.

RD: Oh, I would think so, yes. Do you know of any painters who do--I mean good painters--who do abstract painting one week and figure-painting the next?

SL: No, I think that a lot of people are trying to combine things simultaneously, like say a Susan Rothenberg kind of painter, or Jennifer Bartlett kind of painter, or, you know, they. . . .

RD: Well, they're fusing. It isn't as though--and I, maybe I misunderstood you--I thought you were considering actually doing. . . .

SL: No, I was thinking of that as an impossible situation. But I would think that. . . . But people seem to be trying to combine the elements. . . .

RD: Yeah.



SL: . . . in a way that . . . In my mind, that's still abstract painting; it's not really about . . . It's emblematic rather than truly figurative.

RD: Yes, um hmm.

SL: It's using the figural element as a sign or . . .

RD: Yes, and I've tried that a bit. I mean, I try it all the time, usually gets painted out.

SL: That's different than really tackling the world, concrete world.

RD: Um hmm, right. Yeah, that's something I--probably--I won't do again.

SL: Okay, shall we begin with that?

RD: Okay. So, am I going to see you tomorrow, or is it the Friday?

[Tape 6, side B, not recorded]

End Tape 6

## **End Session 2**

### **Session 3**

Interview with Richard Diebenkorn  
Conducted by Susan Larsen  
1985 May 7

Interview

[Tape 7, side A]

SL: . . . you were talking about Susie Gablik's book and your reaction to that?

RD: Yeah.

SL: Why Has Modern Art Failed?, it was called, I guess.

RD: Yeah. But why on earth would an artist change or allow his message, so to speak, to be distorted by such situations as people want, own your work and take it off and thereby it becomes an elite. . . .

SL: Is it that, was it a reaction to the conceptual artists' desire to not have work be a commodity, that kind of thing.

RD: Well. . . Yeah, um hmm.

SL: And is it, you were saying that these extrinsic things are changing the course of how people are making art?

RD: Well, apparently. And certainly I know that was a large factor in the art of sixties, especially, early seventies. Possibly if I had been starting in at that time, well, I would have felt these pressures

and my strategies, so to speak, would have been, would have conformed, or would have been affected by those pressures. And I suppose because I really started in the forties, with a very different kind of environment, without any possibility of dealer, or anyone handling my work, or any money to be made or anything like that, I have a different, totally different stance--and, one which. . . You would say to a student at that time, "Oh, what do you really, what are you really up to?" And "Are you going to chop this up in some way because of these pressures?"

SL: As the various, as different waves of style or of movements after--even after hard-edge painting, even after the conceptual art movement--as those things came along, did you think about those, or. . . . There have been artists who have started out in your generation who have really shifted their focus according to subsequent artistic phases that have come along, and attached themselves to those things.

RD: Um hmm.

SL: Were there times when you thought about that, or. . . .

RD: Of course I thought about it. And I'm sure right along I've been affected, and I think I've been affected by what's being done now right along, but I haven't done what these artists you've just referred to, actually shifted stylistically or. . . . Clearly. (chuckles)

SL: Uh huh, yes.

RD: I'm going to close that window because of all the traffic.

[Interruption in taping]

RD: . . . to say was that. . . . I almost suggested this, but then I thought, "Well, no, you should do it your way, and I should be surprised." But I almost did suggest that you bring in kind of inflammatory. . . .

SL: Oh, I see!

RD: . . . statements, things to react to, because we were talking about the reasons, or the causes, for going off on a tangent. That's all.

SL: Oh, okay. Well, as, at a certain point in the sixties, it seemed that the activity in painting as a, as the primary vehicle of progressive art, people tended to lose faith in painting as a carrier of those ideas, and there was so much more activity in sculpture and then eventually conceptual art and various things. And do you remember, did you have any feelings about painting at that point, and sorting through your own commitment to painting and drawing?

RD: Sure. I never for a moment shared any of the mistrust in painting as a--how one phrases this--a viable vehicle? (laughter)

SL: Uh huh.

RD: However, I was very much involved with teaching, as one has to be as a full-time teacher. And I found this disturbing, the effect of these pressures that you've referred to on the students, and. . . . Because I continually found that my, the best undergraduates that I dealt with, the sharpest ones, when they became graduate students, then something happened between undergraduate status and graduate. Suddenly they were in quotes, "artists," but with this totally different stance, this kind

of sixties nonpainting, whatever they'd be, would be doing. And that disturbed me a lot. And the, it was only the docile ones that sort of kept to it. There] are exceptions, too]. . . .

SL: Yes, I would think there would be.

RD: But usually it was the plodders and the docile ones, perhaps pretty good ones, who stayed with painting. And then shortly before I stopped teaching in '73, I started to feel the swing back to the core of things (chuckles) in visual art, I think, I believe there's something in the painting, more than in sculpture.

SL: Well, certainly that was a time too when the, I'd say in the political climate internationally and in this country, made people think about the role of art in a, in not even a subject-matter way, but the position of art in the economic strata and the role of the artist and. . . .

RD: Yes, um hmm.

SL: . . . a lot of ways of, a lot of parts of inquiry seemed to come into art that were not there in the same form before.

RD: Uh huh. In this, this was disturbing to me too. It was, I'm not saying that, by any means, that an artist should put his head in the sand or just mind the paint going onto the canvas; of course he should be aware of, of what, those subjects you mentioned. And I just felt that they had gotten ahold of artists in a way that seemed very wrong to me.

SL: Is there a. . . . I don't want to suggest a way of. . . .

RD: Distorting them. . . . Hmm?

SL: It seemed to me that in, that it was a very superficial thing to try to invalidate a medium that had been with us since the cave painters. . . .

RD: Sure, oh yes.

SL: . . . on the basis of something quite immediate.

RD: Exactly. I feel that states it very concisely. And where I was concerned, the only reason I was involved with art was that I had a passion for the painting and drawing, which began some fifteen or more years before I even knew about art. We've been on this topic earlier. And so not only the tradition as you say since prehistoric painting, but also my own history with, it just meant this unfeasible, that I might have dropped this. (chuckles) I mean, my reason for being and doing, and well. . . .

SL: There's, well, it's just my opinion, but it seemed too that some of the people who were making art at that time weren't, didn't come to art that way. . . .

.

RD: They certainly didn't.

SL: . . . didn't have it in their bones, so to speak.

RD: Um hmm. And, well, there's just a way of speaking of it that describes something of what I mean. When I was a student in art school, I, my friends, referred to ourselves as painters. That was

going to be our calling. And that changed around totally in the sixties. Students came, they were going to be artists! They didn't know anything about painting; they'd maybe never. . . . They weren't painters, they weren't drawers, and they weren't sculptors; they were artists. And they were fishing around, or sort of waiting for, to be chosen by one of the, those talents in one of those potential shoveling of earth, or. . . .

SL: Oh, you mean to work as an apprentice or something?

RD: Hmm?

SL: To work as an apprentice?

RD: Oh, I think they were in search of media.

SL: I see, uh huh. That brings up an interesting sort of topic. In the, all along in your career, you've had quite--at least this is how I see it from my distant perspective--but it seems that your work has been well received from almost the beginning. And yet you, it doesn't seem you've sought out a lot of media attention. . . .

RD: No.

SL: . . . or tried to capitalize or manufacture it. I wonder. . . .

RD: Well, I thought that, I felt right along that that's very much secondary, or even irrelevant to what an artist is up to.

SL: How so? Could. . . .

RD: Hmm?

SL: How so? Could you explain?

RD: How so?

SL: It does play a large part in our, the art world out there.

RD: Well, is it fair to answer, in answering that to just shift time a little bit, and. . . .

SL: Sure, yeah.

RD: . . . think about Cezanne?

SL: Please.

RD: Not that Cezanne didn't have considerable passion at one stage of, several moments in his life, to be recognized by his peers, possibly to show his work in Paris, or, and be one of the artists, those things beyond his painting. And then it's true in later life when people started to visit him in Aix, his painting picked up a lot: he became much more prolific and clearly he was delighted. So I'm just sort of pointing out that of course there are these requirements, or rather needs, for an artist to have a little feedback from the outside world. But it seems that today it becomes kind of all-consuming.

SL: You sense a, do you sense a sense of competition for attention, or a feeling of this one gets more attention or that one gets more attention, or are you pretty much not thinking about that?

RD: Oh, I just, I can observe that kind of. . . . That's what makes for a rat race or however you refer to it. I have certainly observed that, but I don't share any of this personally. And I'm not intending to be holier than thou or. . . .

SL: Oh yes, it's. . . .

RD: Also it disturbs me a little bit to be in this older generation of artists and being appalled by the orientation, the overt kind of ambition and P.R. and etcetera, because I can, as soon as I start talking like that, I think of myself as a young painter and thinking of some of the old guard and the disgusting way they used to talk about how art used be: [not] a high degree of craft and artists could really draw and. . . .

SL: Uh huh, it becomes a "it was better before." Yeah.

RD: Yeah.

SL: But isn't, but at this stage in your career, with the enormous regard in which you're held and the position you have, do you find that there's a different, that there's a pressure involved with that, or can you, have you sort of grown into it and it's not so much something you feel?

RD: It doesn't bother me. I guess I've, well, I suppose there are occasionally instances when I can be mightily bothered, but for the most part I'm not. I've, to use your phrase, I guess I have grown into it. You say I've been well received, but. . . .

SL: How do you feel about that? Is that wrong?

RD: I suppose finally I guess I have to admit to that. I've been lucky in certain ways. From that first exhibition that I, we talked about, where you might say it was simply because I was on the faculty that I had one-man show, at that time an early, an early age--not today.

SL: But you attracted the attention of people who not only made a real commitment of their interest and attention, but have stuck through all this time--I mean, collectors, of people who were interested in your work. It seems that there's been a steadiness about it.

RD: Hmm, well, I guess there was.

SL: Um hmm.

RD: Oh, I guess there's a little discomfort involved with talking about these things--which relates to what we're talking about, of course. I can say I, as I just did, and you did, "I've sort of grown into this; it doesn't bother me," but I betray a little bit of nervousness in the discussion of it. I don't really, I'm not comfortable being, altogether comfortable, being accepted. (chuckles)

SL: Uh huh. Which you incredibly are: coast to coast, international.

RD: Well, and that's ironic, because when I started out, there was, well, I wasn't accepted, except in a very limited sense: and Germaine McAgy and Douglas and the people around the art school. Outside of that, there was no acceptance at all, and there was sort of an assumption that embarking on this career of being an artist meant being poor. And so I was resigned to that. . . . And being unrecognized, hopefully recognized within a small circle. And that's certainly the way it started out. There's a painting over there on, that. . . .

SL: This one here?

RD: Yeah, that. . . .

SL: That's an earlier. . . .

RD: . . . I'm going to be lending to Paul Schimmel for a show, and I was looking at it yesterday, and, well, that's the one I want to give him, but he responded to several works in '49, in 1949, or '48 I think it is, that he--well, come to the point Dick. What I'm wanting to say is that I expect that painting on paper to be accepted. I expect it to be liked.

SL: Yes. Yes.

RD: Now when I did the painting, it would have been absurd to put it up anywhere, in San Francisco--or anyplace.

SL: Um hmm.

RD: Put it up in, at the Cedars [sic] Bar in New York, and maybe a couple of people would like, or hang it up at the art school. . . . But it's curious for me, having started where I am, to look around at all the people who just assume that they know all about this--and do know quite a bit about it--and yet their counterparts then didn't know anything. (chuckles)

SL: Um hmm, and there are, it's probably the same situation. . . . Well, maybe it's not, but one would think that. . . .

RD: Well, that's an interesting thing to get on, right there, I think.

SL: Yes, it's, how the audience has changed and. . . .

RD: Yeah.

SL: That's the, that, though, was the avant garde and artist recipe for that struggle with the, with ideas and the public and your position in the society, and that was the recipe of that time.

RD: Now which. . . . The recipe?

SL: That the artists vision would be ahead of the general viewer, even the general educator.

RD: Is that a recipe?

SL: Well, I think came. . . .

RD: It seems to me it's just sort of built in and, as a set of facts, and I find "recipe" a curious. . . . "Recipe" implies. . . .

SL: Something set, you mean?

RD: . . . an construction or concoction of. . . .

SL: I guess, I don't mean it in a negative term. But I was thinking that that was something that was there. . . .

RD: No, I didn't think you meant negative.

SL: . . . that was there in the 19th century and that was expected. . . . I think a lot of young artists coming out of school today are truly hopeful of acceptance and, if not instant, but soon some kind of sense that they're doing something that someone is appreciative of, and if there's a, if there is a long period of really bitter struggle or rejection, that's not expected necessarily. It's not automatically assumed that it's going to take a very long time, if ever.

RD: Um hmm. Yes. And yet these same people want to be with. . . . A lot of them cherish the idea of avant garde, of. . . .

SL: Um hmm, yes, and are they compatible?

RD: I'm thinking of Bill Wilson's commentary Sunday, on David Hockney.

SL: Oh.

RD: You read that I'm sure.

SL: No, I didn't. I missed it.

RD: Oh. Well, David didn't come out too well in Bill's eyes. But Wilson compares the--it's a review of the show in San Francisco of his, of Hockney's stage.

SL: [Bitter]? Uh huh.

RD: And Wilson just observes the character of the comparable work that was done, say in the first decade of the century. . . .

SL: In Picasso's Parade, and things like that?

RD: Yeah. And what David work amounts to, which was totally charming and from my point of view--and I think Wilson says so too--but he also has great reservations. I didn't mean to get into Hockney but the. . . .

SL: Well, the, perhaps the reason I used that word is that I've just been reading a whole stack of graduate papers on, from a seminar I did. . . .

RD: Are you back to the "recipe"?

SL: Yeah. . . . on modernism and supposedly postmodernism, and the distance on the notion of an avant garde that is abroad in the critical community--and in many circles: in literature, music, art. . . .

RD: Today?

SL: Yeah. . . . that the separation of the artists' mission from the perception of the audience, the assumption that that's going to always be the case. Many have written about it as a historical set of concepts that were generated out of the late 18th, early 19th century. We are wondering if modernism and the avant garde are linked to one another, if modernism has taken a turn or is no longer, if we're no longer modern, perhaps we're no longer living in that set of circumstances.

RD: Um hmm.

SL: That's at least some of the ideas that are around at the moment, and I think graduate students and I are trying to grapple with. . . . Therefore, if there is more of a rapprochement between the artist and the audience, say as perhaps there might have been in previous times, that perhaps the, a long period of a lag time or a catch-up or a feeling of being alone and apart is not necessarily true always. Does that make sense?

RD: Sure it does, um hmm.

SL: If the artist is pressing forward almost skittering and straining to get back \_\_\_\_\_ along this direction, maybe the audience has changed, but maybe our way of perceiving things has changed somewhat too. If his work is charming, perhaps there were things, say in the 18th century, that were immediately charming too.

RD: Yes.

SL: And maybe those were not less for being so.

RD: Agreed, sure.

SL: I mean, I don't know, but this is. . . . Whereas in the modernist point of view something that is seductive to a receptive audience, there was something maybe not quite strong enough or lean enough for it to be important.

RD: Well, that wasn't faint praise that I, when I said charming.

SL: Yes. No, no, I didn't mean, I knew that you meant that as a positive thing.

RD: I see it. . . . Well, I'm sure not differently from you, but I, what I want to say now is a somewhat different approach to this same. . . .

SL: Um hmm.

RD: I think if, in a time of change, of, where there are big changes, which of course there were at the beginning of the, of this century--certainly not my idea; I mean, this is the traditional one I would think--that the artist is out there sniffing out the change that's coming in and making his expressions in terms of that, about that, feeding the change. . . .

SL: Yes.

RD: . . . and so of course in a situation like that there's going to be a lot of catch-up that the audience will have to be doing, assuming that the audience is not in touch as the artist is with what's coming in. And isn't that how it was?

SL: Um hmm, yes.

[Tape 7, side B]

RD: . . . lagged. Either the changes aren't, the broad changes are not occurring, or the artist isn't sniffing them out.

SL: Ah hah, yes.

RD: And. . . . Because I think the lag is built into that situation.



SL: Well, what . . .

RD: And I think it would be, one immediately thinks charm and immediate exception, acceptance, [correcting from exception to acceptance--Ed.], [well, but] when things have. . . Rococco, and. . .

SL: Yes, Fragonard.

RD: Fragonard, and. . .

SL: And yet how wonderful certain Watteaus are. . .

RD: Yes.

SL: . . . which are charming on the surface and deep on the inside.

RD: Yes, yes! But I just wanted to go on with that, and think about that moment what seems to me that things were turning over, were changing, which belies what I said. Here was a situation where there's this immediate exception, acceptance, [that's in here]. Or maybe, maybe there was, maybe at that time, there, things did momentarily kind of settle out and things were in place for a while for everyone and in order that they could immediately respond to and love a piece of music that's, that is, has real integrity and, or a piece of architecture or a painting.

SL: I wonder if there's an analogy. When an artist establishes a group of things to work on and a way of working and an identity, and then as your life and career go on, could it be that the audience after a long period of time either senses or is, learns about what you've been about?

RD: Oh, I'm certain of that! Yes, yes.

SL: And then as your later work comes along that's built on that and moving forward from it, that later work, there's already a backlog of some kind of feeling for that work that's in the mind of the audience.

RD: Yes, um hmm.

SL: So that then the new work doesn't look, I mean, there's, there are components of something familiar and then something new to offer that. . .

RD: One hopes, "something new to offer." Because in lots of cases it just, the work simply looks dated or old hat. An artist who is continuing attempting to develop, what his, in terms of his roots or in terms of his. . .

SL: There's a difference too I think--and here I'm sticking my own ideas here--but there's a difference between an idea that was style-bound and time-bound, that's part of the large, part of something, that's in the stream of history there, component of it, and then something that's larger than that, that is capable of being developed.

RD: Uh huh.

SL: And it seems that through your career you've gone on to build on those components in your own particular way.

RD: Um hmm. This is the only, only thing that makes sense to me, really, in proceeding.

SL: Because not every artist who comes from a particular root knows what to do with it, or is capable of seeing beyond it or developing. . . .

RD: Yes, it does, I guess. With me, and I'm sure with lots of artists, there are moments when you, when you feel that things are looking pretty repetitious, and you somehow get set out, set up on the canvas in a pretty familiar way, and at which time one, in a given mood, may want to reject this, you know, really want to stir things up and get off on a totally different foot, and. . . . Which certainly I've done a lot.

SL: Yes.

RD: Except almost always it doesn't really--doesn't really work. I mean, the new beginnings can provide great excitement for a couple of days, maybe one day. (both chuckle) And then finally one looks and sees that, you know, you're really, maybe this work has certain excitement, but it really isn't about what you're about. And so it isn't, I don't think it's a pull, sometimes it has felt to me like a pulling in of my horns. But to cut back and not insert those--not in the spirit of inserting those old tried and true things--but maybe simply in terms of making this thing, this piece viable, well, so much of the old stuff creeps back in when one isn't looking, and. . . .

SL: Do you think of a new piece as part of the whole lifetime body of work when you make it? Does it have to stand up and measure up, or make sense in relation to the rest?

RD: Oh, I. . . . Well, in some sense, yes. Because I think what one is about now is, has intimately to do with what one did yesterday, ten years ago, thirty years ago. Just as you can continue that progression, what somebody else did, forty years earlier, a hundred years earlier, I think that's what one as an artist probably is.

SL: Um hmm. Probably an impossible question; I bet I know the answer already. But--and it's a cliché--but are, do you think you, are you painting for yourself or for history or for an audience out there, or all of that, or none of the above.

RD: That's a terribly hard question, because. . . .

SL: Yeah, I know it is. Probably not a fair one either.

RD: I just don't think. . . . I'm not just sure people [can] possibly know themselves so well that they can honestly answer that. I do know that when I'm immersed in my, in a work, I'm not thinking of anything but making this work come around. I guess, for me. However, the (chuckles), the--and to say it is almost embarrassing. Often when suddenly they, the intense activity ceases and I feel, "Jesus, there it is! Finally! There it is!" Then--and this is what I'm saying is embarrassing--I start thinking, "What am I going to do with this piece?" I want to get it out, I want to get it out, show it to somebody.

SL: Ah, yeah.

RD: [And, Anyway,] I think that's part of, that's part of being an artist too.

SL: Oh sure.

RD: Unless I'm so, I'm awfully different from other artists, and I assume that this is. . . . And it's certainly held up in my lifetime. When I did the "ultimate locomotive" on the shirt cardboard, at age six or so, I really wanted to show it to anybody my family might bring to the house, and things had to

stop for a moment while this shirt cardboard was carefully looked at. So. So in that sense one might be painting for others. Sometimes I think I'm--and as I've said--when I'm really immersed I don't have thoughts like this at all, but there's a lot of the time when the painter isn't immersed and the painting is plodding along and getting together slowly. At times like this I might think that I'm painting for an ideal person.

SL: Somewhere down the line, somewhere far into history?

RD: Somewhere out there, there's somebody that, who I think is the ideal receiver of what I'm, what I'm trying to put together.

SL: That person may not even be born yet.

RD: Well, maybe he's never going to be born. He's an abstraction, he's somebody who might be out there, somewhere. And what were the other possibilities? You said are you painting for yourself or for an audience or. . . .

SL: Oh, for history. I was thinking of history.

RD: Oh, for history.

SL: Yeah, for that future. . . .

RD: History. [ruminating--Ed.] Well, in some sense, too, because I guess I can think of a certain school of thinking about art which believes that an artist is doing a "corrective," so to speak, to the work of predecessors.

SL: I was thinking, the other day when you were discussing that you were going to work on a project, that you had your work to do, and I could sense that, that either you spend your time this way or that way, and I thought, "Yes, all the projects are great--and the interviews and the writing--all that stuff's just great, but it, if the paintings don't exist it doesn't amount to anything.

RD: Um hmm.

SL: It's not about a thing. And I've had a very strong sense that first of all in the beginning there are the paintings. And that getting them realized and having them be there is the most important thing.

RD: Oh yes.

SL: And all the rest can follow in its wake, and. . . .

RD: Absolutely.

SL: And that, in that sense, I have a sense that there was a commitment there to making those paintings, and to have, bring them into being. . . .

RD: Um hmm.

SL: . . . and that that was historically the most thing.

RD: Yes.

SL: And in, it, audience, or whatever, coming maybe far into the future, but there they are. . .

RD: Um hmm.

SL: . . . and all that content.

RD: Right.

SL: Maybe? Sometimes when you don't make things yourself, in that way, you don't really understand it.

RD: Um hmm, um hmm.

SL: That's, I found I'm [moving] to realize that in a clear way, how important. . . . Anyway, they're intriguing. I think of all the, you know, very well known, very important American painters out there, and the pressures that people describe on their lives, but it doesn't seem to. . . .

RD: Pressures [that] what?

SL: That people describe. I visited deKooning one time with a friend, and there was such an emporium there.

RD: Such a what?

SL: Such an emporium. There were people doing this, and people doing that, and a procedure to register each work.

RD: At his place, you mean?

SL: Yeah, yeah. It was just, it was like a. . . . It was like a studio, but it was like a corporation or something.

RD: I'm surprised.

SL: It was a, well, it was and it wasn't. There were two or three people. . . . When something was made, it was numbered, and measured, and photographed, and put in a book, and so forth.

RD: Um hmm.

SL: All these things happened to it. And then it was put here, and then something else happened to it, and there was this Abstract Expressionist quietude in the workplace, but right out, a half a step away, was this whole thing that went on.

RD: Going on, hmm?

SL: That was about the world out there, and about. . . .

RD: Did Bill look out, or. . . .

SL: Well, it was just, I think it just. . . .

RD: . . . reveal himself (chuckles) personally, or. . . .

SL: Oh yeah, oh sure, yes. He was wonderful.

RD: Because I gather--this must have been a while ago.

SL: This was about five years ago; I went out with a friend of, an old friend.

RD: Because I've talked to Elaine [de Kooning--Ed.] fairly recently, who said that he just doesn't see anybody. He's just. . . .

SL: Well, I didn't go there on my own; I went with an old friend of his who was the same age, who had been a friend from the forties.

RD: Um hmm.

SL: And he was a friend. . . .

RD: There have to be people taking care of. . . . Or, maybe there don't.

SL: Yes, but it was just, I mean, it was quite interesting, and one could sense that there was this world pressure and then there was this work place, and then that there was a real struggle to keep the work place have a semblance of normalcy and quiet, and. . . . But the world was right at the door.

RD: Um hmm. In Robert Motherwell's studio (chuckles), he has it staffed by lots and lots of people.

SL: Yeah, yeah.

RD: And, but he handles it with great ease, and grace, of course. He's a graceful person. But I, last time I was there, I was a little nonplussed that. . . . I think somebody's working on his prints, and in the next room somewhere, Bob is working. . . .

SL: That was the same kind of thing.

RD: . . . and somebody else is doing something with his collage in the collage room, and then (laughter) somebody's moving pictures out so we can look at them, and somebody else is at a desk typing, and. . . . His life is kind of busy too. . . .

SL: Um hmm.

RD: . . . doing any number of things.

SL: It's not exactly the atelier of, that one pictures, in a classical sort of way.

RD: No. It's certainly not the Cezanne example that. . . . (chuckles)

SL: No.

RD: But I guess it's certainly the example of a lot of artists in the past, Rubens being a striking example.

SL: Curious. Curious and interesting. I just found it very surprising.

RD: Yeah.

SL: And yet not. You know, yet not.

RD: Um hmm.

SL: Perhaps that's there to keep that place quiet.

RD: Well, there was a little surprise about Bill deKooning.

SL: Um hmm.

RD: That actually there was not activity so close to him--in the next room as you say.

SL: In the next wing. It was in the next wing.

RD: Yeah.

SL: In the same building.

RD: Same building.

SL: Right there. But otherwise, he'd be doing all by himself, which wouldn't necessarily be so wise either, so. . . .

RD: Yeah, I know it's not wise for me. But I'd be. . . . If instead of my tenants downstairs, there was this crew doing all these things in relation to my work, and I had to sort of pass that doorway as I came up the stairs, I'd, it would really ruin my day.

SL: It would? (laughter)

RD: I know it's very silly that I. . . . I did for years have somebody build my stretchers and stretch my canvas, but now I've even, I've lost those people, and so I do that myself now, knock down the stretchers. But, it's sort of silly to be so. . . . (sighs) I'm just looking at the state of things. I won't have anyone come in and clean the place, and yet I won't do it myself, and that's why it's so, you know.

SL: Well, I think it's grand. I like this much better than that other, but it's just intriguing to see that. . . . I found that very puzzling, but then I quite understood; it was like almost a small industry based on a person's work, and. . . .

RD: Which doesn't seem to be in line with what Bill was about, earlier.

SL: Yeah. But, I'm sure there are reasons.

RD: Sure.

SL: Real good ones.

RD: Hmm?

SL: Probably real good ones, too.

RD: Yeah.

SL: Otherwise things get messed up and it doesn't stay orderly.

RD: Right.

SL: It's just that the success and acclaim and interest and all these things bring their own pressures and ways of, I guess, coping with them.

RD: Sure. I remember when deKooning was building his studio, there was talk about this arrangement of his, for his easel, where there was a little pit or a slot where, in the floor, where, so the painting could drop down. . . .

SL: Come down?

RD: . . . and he could paint at the top and not have to get up on a ladder. This is all hydraulically powered, way, way up, so that he could paint on the bottom. (laughter) And a very involved expensive enterprise, just this easel. Which I just. . . .

SL: Yeah, it was quite a splendid place.

RD: It seemed that that man has made a, made. . . .

SL: Well, I like. . . .

RD: This is not damning at all. It's just wonder, you know.

SL: Yeah.

RD: That this man could make these changes, because I know at one time he was like things are here, and I have these various, I have to unscrew two screws. . . . [walking away from microphone to demonstrate--Ed.]

SL: Attached screws, uh huh.

RD: . . . on that thing and two up there: great big screws with, in order to make that, the same kind of changes.

SL: Um hmm, very simply. Well, perhaps, should we go back to our place in the fifties?

RD: Sure!

SL: Is that okay?

RD: Sure, yeah.

SL: Okay. Let's see. That was fun. I enjoyed that. If that was okay for you.

RD: Okay, I hope we haven't wasted too much time. (laughs)

SL: No, I don't think so. Okay. We stopped somewhere around 1956, I think, in your evolution, and one of the things I had written down of that year was your Poindexter show, that you had at that time.

RD: Yeah.

SL: And I was wondering, who was the director there, and how was that show received?

RD: Umm, Ellie Poindexter--and Hal Fondren was her director, I guess.

SL: Those were your figurative paintings made in Berkeley?

RD: No, these were, my first show there was abstract painting done in 1955.

SL: Okay, excuse me.

RD: So it was a fairly large show. She had a gallery at that time that was, could hold a big--it was a big brownstone with high ceilings and a couple of ample rooms. Later she moved uptown and it wasn't quite the same good situation. And so the show was. . . . I didn't go back for it! I forget why. The paintings were accepted, anyway. So I just [have] photographs of it, but it was well received, and very well received for a, I guess, for an outlander in New York.

SL: Yes.

RD: I got some feedback from it. Nothing elaborate, no great. . . . I wonder \_\_\_\_\_ when Dore Ashton, if it was after that? She gave me the first kind of in-depth review in Arts and Architecture, and that might have been in response to that show, which really buoyed me up, because she was very enthusiastic and it was just sort of an all-out rave review.

SL: It was. And she also was coming out of a New York attitude, I would think.

RD: Yeah.

SL: And so that was nice too, because it really cut it up at that level and that. . . .

RD: And I can remember some other kind of snide reviews that, to the effect that I was well-schooled in New York painting.

SL: Uh huh.

RD: I might be from California, from the sticks, and yet I was very well acquainted with what real painting was about. Very snide.

SL: Yes. Pretty good for an outsider, huh?

RD: Yeah, I'd made a real study of the people, good strong first-generation people there.

SL: And yet the structure of your painting was very different.

RD: Well, that wasn't said. (chuckles)

SL: In '57 you took part in the first Ferus show?

RD: Umm.

SL: You had a painting in the opening show of the. . . .

RD: Yeah.

SL: I wonder, how did you get connected with those folks, and how did that happen?



RD: [Around this time in the tape, Diebenkorn appears to have moved away from the microphone, making many of his words indistinguishable--Ed.] Well, I guess it was in 1954 that Walter Hopps-- and I guess Craig Kaufmann--visited me--visited my house--in Berkeley, and they had big plans for down here, and they were going to put on a show--which maybe they did--in the merry-go-round on the pier?

SL: Oh, I've heard of that, yes.

RD: I didn't ever see it, and I was never sure when it, exactly when it occurred, but I was in touch with them. And then I was--what was the date of that, of the Ferus opening?

SL: '57.

RD: '57. Well, so I'd had two exhibitions with Paul Kantor, '52 and '54.

SL: Um hmm.

RD: So my work was, it was known here. And then for the opening of the Ferus show. . . . I don't think they asked me. . . . I kind of think that the painting they used was Gerry Nordland's painting that he'd bought from me when he visited, when we first met, in Albuquerque. I think that was the one, but I'm not, I'm not absolutely certain.

SL: So it didn't really, they didn't come up and contact you and tell you what their plans were?

RD: Not for the Ferus, no. And then, I didn't have anything further to do with Ferus. I guess Clyfford Still, who I think had nothing further to do with Ferus, was also included in that, at that opening show. So. And I guess the \_\_\_\_\_ with some of the Ferus people I know, Billy Al [Bengston--Ed.], who had been a student of mine, I guess when the exhibition recently, Returned to Ferus, or. . . .

SL: Yes, the one they did in Newport, Last Time I Saw Ferus.

RD: Yeah, I think I, that's the [one I] saw. I think Billy Al came out with a statement to the effect that ["Why this \_\_\_\_\_? Why don't you, you never had a \_\_\_\_\_ [with] Ferus." \_\_\_\_\_]. So it was certainly \_\_\_\_\_.

SL: But you were in that, in that first show?

RD: I was in the first show, yeah.

SL: But it, there wasn't a, you weren't particularly part of that social scene, or any of that at the time you were. . . .

RD: No.

SL: You were up north and. . . .

RD: I'm trying to think.

SL: Kienholz was running the gallery at that time.

RD: I didn't know Kienholz then. I didn't know Hopps. And I knew Bengston. I had a Bengston hung in my studio. I think I knew. . . . Oh, well, I knew Craig Kaufmann, for his having visited with Hopps. I don't think I knew anybody else. I didn't know [John--Ed.] Altoon. I never met Altoon actually.

SL: Huh. Even, I guess, had he died by the time you came down here?

RD: I think he had. I'm not certain. He came down here in '66. I think he had. . . .

SL: I'll have to look it up and see. So, it was called Objects in the New Landscape.

RD: Hmm?

SL: Did, and you didn't see that show, I gather?

RD: No, I didn't see the Ferus show. I did go to Ferus once, on a visit down here. I think there was an Altoon show up, and I think that was the first time that I was aware of Altoon.

End Tape 7

[Tape 8, side A]

RD: . . . I was aware of the Ferus Gallery down here and the, that there was something of great interest going on in L.A., but I looked at it from afar and. . . .

SL: Yes. But prior to that, there were other galleries here though that you had good, a good feeling about: Kantor's Gallery, and maybe. . . .

RD: Kantor's.

SL: Did you know Landau? Felix Landau? Have any contact with those people?

RD: I . . . I guess I'd met him, but I didn't, I don't remember ever talking with him at any length until we moved down here, in '66.

SL: Did you ever know John McLaughlin?

RD: I met him--oh, possibly the year he died, or maybe just the year before--at an opening.

SL: Did you, do you have any feelings about his work?

RD: Oh yes. I . . . "My feelings about his work." I just think it's work of great quality and I think he's a first-rate painter. And, but when we met, I don't know, he just seemed very gruff, and we shook hands and had a few words, and I . . .

SL: Openings are probably. . . .

RD: . . . gave homage to the older artist, told him that I admired his work, and that was about it. But I never really knew him. I used to hear about him from Nick Wilder, and apparently Nick was very involved.

SL: I guess so.

RD: . . . with McLaughlin and his life.

SL: It seems remarkable that he did what he did, at that time here, in L.A.

RD: Oh yes indeed.

SL: . . . that's quite inspiring to all of us, I guess.

RD: Uh huh.

SL: But he apparently--oh, I don't know; I wasn't here so it's hard to say--but, that the regard in which he's held now seems to be, to have grown quite a lot and. . . .

RD: Um hmm!

SL: . . . the awareness of his work in the community.

RD: Um hmm. And it's curious that when he was in his prime, I guess I hadn't even heard of him! Maybe I would have if I'd lived down here, but I certainly hadn't heard of him in San Francisco [or] at Berkeley.

SL: And he didn't have a national profile at all.

RD: No, not at all.

SL: Not, I don't know how much locally. Good for him, to do that. . . .

RD: Yeah. Yeah.

SL: . . . and keep his view. In '60, 1957, excuse me, you had, Herschel B. Chipp wrote an article for Art News that was well known, "Richard Diebenkorn Paints a Picture."

RD: Um hmm.

SL: And then you, that was a part of a long series of articles that were profiles of artists--in their studios--those two years.

RD: Yes, uh huh, right.

SL: And I wonder how did, how did it feel when that thing happened?

RD: Well, I felt, the painting I did turned into a, I suppose an attempted tour de force, never too interested in the painting as it finally, the finished picture that they reproduced in color, in the article. The whole thing was a bit artificial, I felt, or it became so. Another kind of artist might have handled it easily, but. . . . There was a marvelous woman photographer who took--who lived in Berkeley at the time--who took the black and white pictures. She was in my studio a bit, and she kind of expected me to be working while she was there, which I can't work when somebody's there, especially with a camera.

SL: Um hmm.

RD: Just most self-conscious thing, so here's the picture I'm dealing with, and I've got a paint on it and make a, you know. . . .

SL: It's really. . . .

RD: . . . really kind of destroy it in order to be photographed painting on it, and so that was difficult and I guess Herschel wanted to be around a little bit while I was working. He was very good, actually. But he made several visits in the process of the picture. I would, we would, I'd show the

work at its present state to him, we'd talk about it, and. . . .

SL: Which was, I guess, the format of those. . . .

RD: Which is hard too, because I don't like to show pictures. . . . Pictures that aren't done embarrass me. So.

SL: It wasn't a particularly enjoyable thing.

RD: And then the thing came out and here everything I said somehow seemed overamplified. It was, there was nothing untrue. But, and it wasn't Herschel that did this, it was just somehow a lot of things that I said being amplified in, as happens in print. It just made me very nervous.

SL: Apparently they did quite a number of those and. . . .

RD: They did a lot of them.

SL: It's almost like the last gasp of action painting.

RD: Yeah, yeah. And then, I know that, Tom Hess asked me to do, asked me to do this on the basis of my first show there, which was abstract.

SL: Ah hah.

RD: And then, I know there was disappointment, that there were, they were actually going to do "so-and-so paints a picture with a figurative". . . . (laughter) And that was very good of them not to say. . . .

SL: Sort of toss you out?

RD: . . . sorry, but we don't want to do it after all."

SL: Uh huh.

RD: Good of them, or maybe they, maybe this was sort of newsy exposure of this fallen artist. (laughs a belly laugh)

SL: Oh, I doubt that. I doubt that sincerely.

RD: Oh well!

SL: But that was a curious format, but there were some notable, I mean, it was a very prestigious series of articles to be part of, I would think, it would seem, looking through the magazine. I looked through it to see.

RD: Um hmm, I guess they did, did those so-called first-generation people, were they?

SL: Um hmm, I guess they did.

RD: Were they done? Was Rothko done?

SL: I don't remember Rothko. I know deKooning was in there.

RD: DeKooning was done, I know.

SL: Yeah, and. . . .

RD: I doubt if [Barnett--Ed.] Newman was done.

SL: I don't think so. [Ad--Ed.] Reinhardt was in it.

RD: Reinhardt, yeah.

SL: So it was of nice company, and that was my historical reason for asking, though, your reaction to the process. It's interesting.

RD: Yeah.

SL: It is an awkward thing to ask somebody to do.

RD: Well, I think some artists handle it very well. I'm sure that David Hockney wouldn't be thrown. (laughter) The more the merrier in his studio.

SL: Remember the film of [Jackson--Ed.] Pollock painting?

RD: Yeah.

SL: Ever seen that? And how, what a painful thing that was.

RD: Yeah, um hmm.

SL: That was not, I'm sure that was not the nicest thing that happened. In 1960, you had an exhibition at the Pasadena Art Museum, one-man show of sixty works.

RD: Um hmm.

SL: From '52 to '60. It was curated by Tom Levitt, and was that the largest show you had up to that time?

RD: Umm, I think it was.

SL: It seemed that it might have been.

RD: There was also a small retrospective in Washington, D.C., that Gerry Nordland did. Was that before Tom's or afterwards?

SL: I'd have to look and see.

RD: Oh, it doesn't really matter, but you asked me was this the largest show that I'd had up to date.

SL: Yes.

RD: If it's before Gerry's, Gerry Nordland's, then it is.

SL: Okay. Let's see, you had one in '60 at the Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco.

RD: Sixty. . . .

SL: And then at the Pasadena Museum, the same year, '60. And then the Phillips Collection, '61, was that the one that you're thinking of?

RD: No, it wasn't at the Phillips. I'm trying to think where. Gerry Nordland was the director of, of . . . Washington Gallery? Let's see. And I did, we were in Washington for that. Oh, oh, it's this show, '64.

SL: '64.

RD: Washington Gallery of Modern Art. Gerry was the director, and he traveled to the Jewish Museum. Oh, and then to Newport, yes, and. . . .

SL: [unintelligible phrase] So the Pasadena Museum show then was a. . . .

RD: That would have been the largest, yeah.

SL: . . . that would have been the largest after that point. Okay. The next notation I have is. . . . I know we discussed this a while back and I remember it was very interesting, your recollection of it, when you went to the Soviet Union, on that trip and the things you had seen there. You went as a guest of the Soviet Artists' Congress, through the State Department? Is that right?

RD: I was a guest of the Artist's Union.

SL: And how did that happen? Did you know someone there?

RD: No, I forget how it happened. I forget who asked me. Somebody in the State Department. But of course I accepted. (smiles)

SL: Yes.

RD: I was. . . . I was going to say I was teaching at Stanford--I was artist-in-residence for a year there, and I guess it was '64. Is that right? It doesn't matter. So I forget how it came about. And we talked about that? We talked about. . . .

SL: Oh, way long in '77, about that.

RD: Yeah.

SL: I remember you mentioned seeing the Matisse and the Shchukin collections.

RD: Yeah.

SL: And some of those, some of that seemed to linger in the paintings of the next year or so.

RD: Oh sure, yeah.

SL: And it was a very special. . . .

RD: It was a real marker in my. . . . It was just a great trip, it just changed my head in--in a lot of ways, I think.

SL: You stopped in Moscow?

RD: I knew you were going to say that.

SL: Yeah. (laughter) I remember it was quite intriguing. It seemed to me it was an important thing.

RD: It was somehow some expanding experience for me, not just in the art way. And I met the. . . . The cultural attache in the embassy in Moscow was Bill Voors. Phyllis and I were about to visit he and his wife; he's the ambassador to Prague, to Czechoslovakia. And we have talked about that, I guess.

SL: Yes.

RD: And that he was, he and his wife--who he's not with any longer--they were just marvelous to be with there, as, when that was possible.

SL: Did you go through a lot of the, did you see not only what was up but things that were in storage?

RD: Yes, um hmm, yeah. At, not in Moscow, but in Leningrad did, at the Hermitage. We went through the, saw all the modern painting that they didn't show, actually. I guess maybe they have it up now.

SL: I hear they have some, yes.

RD: And what was brand new at the Hermitage was, was the, I guess, the Shchukin paintings, lots of Matisses, and there were a few Cezannes, Gauguin. And beautiful galleries, just wonderful upstairs galleries, and perfect light. Then unfortunately the large Matisse Music and The Dance, were too large for the galleries, so they were in stairwells. Maybe they're still situated there. But you left the gallery, say, to go downstairs, and here was this really, [down to] concrete stairwell, and then on the stairwell was either, depending on which end of the galleries you were, was either The Dance or Music, not very well lit.

SL: Music was. . . .

RD: And then the, at the time, too--I understand things have changed a lot with the presentation of the collection at the Hermitage, but then everything else was just appalling. It was really surprising that this special [home] was made for these pictures, whereas the pictures downstairs were hard to see, badly lit, a huge Velasquez of Philip the Fourth, I guess that's. . . .

SL: Rembrandts and all kind of things, huh.

RD: Which you couldn't see, because it was in what had been a chapel, and here was the large Velasquez and the only lighting, there was a bit of light coming through dingy windows, but then the only real light was a single bulb hanging on a long, long, long cord, swinging in the draft.

SL: Tacky, oh, awful.

RD: The only light for it! So here it hung, this lightbulb hung down to about where the top of the painting was, and you can imagine the illumination, and then the painting had varnish on it, so you would sort of dodge around the room and see this piece, that piece at a time, on this whole, on this big surface. You'd never see the whole thing at once. So that was the worst one. But then there were Rembrandts that you could hardly see. And so that was at the Hermitage, and such a feast on one hand, but such a terrible disappointment on the other, and then this marvelous stuff upstairs, for the post-Impressionists.

SL: It seems. . . .

RD: And then, but the Moscow Galleries were better, because the collection had been split between Moscow and Leningrad. And what really disturbed me was the Matisse Triptych, the Moroccan Triptych. There were two of them in--I forget how the split went--but there were three, two in one place and one in the other. I thought, "Oh, my gosh, they don't know that those three go together. . . .

SL: They don't have all three. . . ?

RD: . . . or they, each museum insisted they have a piece of that Triptych or what. And that, I read recently, those three are together now. They're either both in Leningrad, or both in Moscow.

SL: There seem to be some paintings when you came back that were very emphatically recollective of those Matisses.

RD: Yes.

SL: And I wonder, had that trip reinstated his presence strongly in your mind, or. . . .

RD: Um.

SL: Was there something. . . .

RD: At about this time, the representational thing, the figure thing, was kind of running its course. It was getting tougher and tougher, and at about the time of the trip--maybe it started before, or maybe it was right afterward--things really started to flatten out, in the representational. Five years earlier I was dealing with much more traditional depth, space.

SL: Yes.

RD: And so either right after the trip or just before--I think just before because some of this stuff I did when I was at my studio at Stanford, were. . . . Well, things were flattening out, in, well, I'm relating this to Matisse, because of course the Matisse's painting was much flatter in its conception than my representational painting in mid. . . . At the very beginning it was fairly flat, but as I went on, I began becoming. . . . So it was really regressing, then. (chuckles)

SL: It was rather painterly, too, wasn't it. . . .

RD: Yeah, um hmm.

SL: Was it in that middle period, that there was a lot of paint on the surface?

RD: Yeah, and so that's in the sort of mid-point in the representational thing, that's when I had the exhibition in Hilton Kramer, of his article about--which was a very, very ambivalent article, if you can recall, if you've read it--where on one hand, he affirms the painting, and on the other hand feels that it's this impossible falling-back to a Manet or a. . . . I forget what the name of that article was.

SL: I did read it a while ago.

RD: At any rate, after I returned from Russia, then we came down here almost immediately. And the painting I did here, the, really flattened out, and so it was like I was really preparing to go back to abstract painting, although I didn't know it.

SL: So you. . . .



RD: So it happened rather, within a . . . I guess within a year of being down here, I was doing [first] abstract paintings again. But in the first year of working, I did these figurative, representational, and pretty flat and. . . .

SL: So you moved then in '66?

RD: Yeah.

SL: Right. That, was that a big surprise to people around you up there?

RD: That I. . . .

SL: That you decided to make this change after being a northern Californian for so long?

RD: You're talking about the style change or the physical. . . .

SL: Move to. . . . No, the physical move, physical.

RD: I guess, I suppose some of them didn't know quite what to make of it.

SL: Yes.

RD: Why would I go to L.A.? "That place."

SL: But what, was there a . . . Had that been brewing in your mind for a while, before you actually did?

RD: I guess ever since. . . . I think I came down here in 1961. I think those are the dates on the early, earliest Tamarind photographs. I came down as a guest of Tamarind. And that was the first time that I'd been down here. And really responded to Los Angeles. Because I had pretty much gone along with, I guess, my father's judgment about Los Angeles being this big town, and it wasn't a city at all. There was nothing, no real reason to come down here. But when I came down for the Tamarind, at the Tamarind Studio, it seemed like a, [quite] a place to live, and I think that sort of brewed.

SL: What did you find that was. . . . Was it people or art or perhaps both? Perhaps the look of the place.

RD: Something more abstract than that, I think. The pace. The attitude, just the things one might pick up in several days of driving around, talking to people. Being at Tamarind working, and that other artists who were there, and printers, and just sort of catching, in that contact, catching something of their lives and something of the life of Los Angeles, which seemed--it surprised me--quite attractive.

SL: And you went back and thought about it for a few years, or did you come back and forth?

RD: Well, not. . . . I didn't go back and ponder and think, "Well, maybe I'm going to move down there," but I was thinking that the place is . . . rather fondly, and possibly my environment up there is suffering a little bit, even in contrast.

SL: Were you still in Berkeley, or were you living closer to Stanford at that time?

RD: Well, I guess in '61 I then went back to Berkeley and worked there, and then, and I think it was,

the school. . . I was at Stanford for the entire school year, and we lived in Palo Alto. And so then there was the Soviet Union and very little time further at Berkeley. But that incredible thing of getting up and moving, and. . .

SL: Yes, \_\_\_\_\_.

RD: . . . moving it all, house, kids, who didn't want to, didn't want to come down here, and they were just old enough so that they didn't have to. My son was in college and, oh, I guess my daughter was in graduate school at Stanford at that time. So they were both in school and didn't come down here, and of course after, they've been here.

SL: Yes, just visiting?

RD: Just visiting. But they were not about to become. . . Well, my son came down later, several years, to live with us.

SL: So you moved to. . . Were you living then in the Palisades, is that where you went? Or Santa Monica?

RD: We lived in, we've lived in Santa Monica the entire time, really. We lived in another house for a year, 1966. And then had the good fortune to find the place we have now. So we moved in there in '67.

SL: So you basically. . . And then you had a studio down on the same street here, didn't you?

RD: Yeah.

SL: On Main Street?

RD: Yeah, three blocks further south, still on Ocean Park, closer to. . .

SL: From what I gather, there were several interesting people. [Charles--Ed.] Garabedian was in that same building with you? Is that right? Or is that not?

RD: Uhh, no, he took my studio. I think I turned it over to Garabedian when I left. I don't think there was anybody in there.

SL: No. What was this area like when you came here?

RD: Hm?

SL: Was it abuzz with artists or was it pretty much. . .

RD: Oh, lots more artists here, yeah, especially further down in Venice. But there was Jim Turrell, a block down. There was Sam Amato, and Less Biller across the street from me, on Main Street, on the west side of the street. You were asking about who was there?

SL: And then who was your neighborhood, yeah. Who formed your neighborhood?

RD: Well, Sam Francis, was, we shared the second floor of the building at Ashland and Main. He had had the whole floor. . . No, he hadn't. He had the back space which became mine and he was moving into another studio--he had many studios, not at, not just in Los Angeles--but. . .

[Tape 8, side B]

RD: There were two large spaces and one small one, and a sailmaker had the front, large space, beautiful space. Sam had the back space. Well, Sam. . . . I moved into the small room and I worked mostly drawing works on paper there, because it was too small to do canvases. And he let it be known that when he moved out of [this, his] back place I could have it, so I just sort of waited, day after day, working in this little space, and finally he moved out. And so I moved into the back space where he was. Then, I don't know, whether he, I don't know why he moved back.

SL: Uh huh.

RD: But he moved back, then took over the front of the building, where the sailmaker had been. So then there were five or so years where he was in the front and I was in the back.

SL: Quite a core there?

RD: Huh?

SL: Quite a core of activity, huh?

RD: Yeah.

SL: Was this the time when Market Street in Venice was active? Was this a bit, I guess that was bit. . . .

RD: Yeah, um hmm.

SL: . . . early when those people were down there?

RD: Yeah, yeah. So what happened down there, in the following years, was that these movie directors and actors and brokers started buying these places that had been artists' studios, on Market Street and Windward and, well. . . . And pretty soon the good spaces became so expensive that the artists just had to leave. So. That happened a few years ago, when most of [it] moved to downtown.

SL: Right. Too bad, because it's so nice here.

RD: Yes. Yeah.

SL: Lovely light and. . . .

RD: So now these places are all very anonymous and then what's in them are these really fancy pads.

SL: But at that time when you came, was there some sense of a community of people? Did you pop out on the street, have coffee, and talk, or was it pretty much each to his own?

RD: Not really, just, I was involved with the university then, and so I saw my graduate students. Some of them had studios down there, and then there were Amato and Biller, and I saw them occasionally, saw their work. But I was really much more involved with the school, in the school hours, which was about half my time. So then for my own time, I just went to my place and worked, and I had no time left over for socializing or the artists' life or. . . .

SL: All of that, huh?

RD: Yeah.

SL: Were you a full-time teacher when you came to UCLA? Were you teaching full time, a full load?

RD: Oh yes, yes.

SL: And this was, had you decided to teach again, or was the move related to becoming a teacher down here?

RD: Well, that was the excuse for coming down here, really, was UCLA.

SL: And they had, they had invited you?

RD: Fred Wight visited me a couple of times in Berkeley, and \_\_\_\_\_, he wanted me to come down the first time he visited, and I said I couldn't think of it.

SL: (chuckles)

RD: And so then in about, it must have been 1965, he visited again. I said, yeah, I'd come down.

SL: I see.

RD: So that was my excuse to. . . .

SL: And you were there from '66 to '73?

RD: Yeah.

SL: And you were full, you were teaching full time the whole time you were there?

RD: Yeah, um hmm.

SL: Yes.

RD: Well, full time there is. . . .

SL: Two courses?

RD: . . . two courses, yeah. I had, divided my time between my studio course and graduate students. And the graduate students, few of them were actually at the university, because the faculty had taken over their spaces for their own studios. So I just drove around.

SL: Really?

RD: It was very pleasant. Could you take that off for a minute?

SL: Sure, gladly.

End Tape 8

**End Session 3**

## Session 4

Interview with Richard Diebenkorn  
Conducted by Susan Larsen  
1987 December 15

[Tape 9, side A]

SL: I don't either. It's better than a stenographer. [speaking of tape recorder--Trans.]

RD: I guess so.

SL: Okay. This is the . . . It is December 15?

RD: I think it's probably the fifteenth.

SL: Fifteenth. And we're here in Santa Monica, in Richard Diebenkorn's studio, and it's a cold Southern California winter morning, and we are finishing the third--fourth? (chuckles)--session of our interview for the Archives of American Art. All right. When we left off, we finished around 1966, and you were still in Northern California?

RD: Um hmm.

SL: Yes. And was it that spring or summer that you moved to Southern California?

RD: I would have moved for the beginning of the school year, so it would have been summer.

SL: Summer.

RD: And I remember that specifically because we hadn't had a, we hadn't found a place to live when school started.

SL: And where was school--for the record?

RD: Oh, that was UCLA. And we came down and thought, well, it'll be a matter of three or four days, so we'll splurge and stay at the Beverly Hills Hotel, and then time went by and we weren't getting a house, and I could imagine the astronomical bill that was piling up, and then school started and I was teaching at UCLA and living at the Beverly Hills Hotel, which I thought was really incongruous.

SL: (laughs) Pretty classy.

RD: Yeah, yeah. But then finally we found a house to rent that we liked in the Santa Monica Canyon.

SL: Is it near where you live now?

RD: It's closer to the ocean. I'm not sure what . . . I forget what street.

SL: Did you come because you were invited by UCLA to teach?

RD: Yes, I . . .

SL: And how did that . . .

RD: Hmm?

SL: Was that something you initiated, or was it something. . . .

RD: No, no, it was. . . . Fred Wight had asked me for, oh, I guess it was about the third time that he had asked me to come down. And I think he spaced the question every year or so, visit me up north. And suddenly it seemed like a place that I really wanted to, to. . . . I really wanted to live here, and so we came down.

SL: What was your image of the art world down here? And was that an attraction or was it the climate or the cultural. . . .

RD: Well, I think, just as the case now, I feel that I've been in one place too long, and things are wearing out for me a little bit, and I've. . . . Well, for now, I've been here twice as long as any other place. I think I was twelve years in Berkeley. Or, no, more than that. Lived in Berkeley from 1953 to '66. So, well, that's twelve, thirteen years. So we've been twenty-one years here.

SL: As of '87.

RD: Yeah. And I. . . . It's always been good to move around, and I think I just. . . . It wasn't that I was disenchanted with Berkeley, because I love Berkeley and Northern California, but I just wanted something new, something. . . . And I found it. Maybe we went into this before, because we were at 1966. I may have referred to the visit to Tamarind?

SL: I'm not aware of that.

RD: I had come down to do a stint at Tamarind in sixty. . . . It doesn't matter, but early sixties. And I had seen Los Angeles in the new, in a new light. And there was considerable vitality artistically, as we know, and the pace was pretty exciting to me. Very different from north. And so. And then also I had taught summer school at UCLA several years before 1966. I forget which year it was. So I had two opportunities to. . . . Before then, I had had the San Franciscan's kind of superiority feeling about. . . .

SL: Southern California?

RD: Yeah, I kind of looked down my nose at L.A. And my. . . . I know my father had always told me as a boy that there was just nothing down here. (laughter)

SL: By nothing, do they mean culturally or economically?

RD: Just a desert.

SL: Just nothing.

RD: Yeah.

SL: So you came as. . . . When you came, did you come as a teacher? Did you come as an artist, or as both, or did one have more precedence over the other [from day to day]?

RD: I think at that time I considered myself an artist-teacher. That's a terrible thing to say. I don't like that. . . .

SL: Yeah.

RD: . . . hyphenated thing at all. It sounds like a terrible phrase. I've never said it before: artist-teaching.

SL: Um hmm, um hmm.

RD: What I meant was that I always felt that teaching was very much a part of my life, my. . . . That it supplemented the work in the studio in some way. It forced me to define myself, my own position to me. I listen to myself often in the classroom, and that [is, was] often rewarding because sometimes I would realize that, whereas I think I wasn't just of no use to the student, but I was also, I was talking about current problems in the, my studio.

SL: Um hmm. Your students bring things in as well.

RD: Yeah. So. . . . But I came down here. [I came down here to teach and to work. Teach and to think. So. . . . And of course the painting always takes precedence, but nevertheless I felt always that I was a little, always a little afraid to leave teaching. I think I told you maybe before, in 1958 I had some gallery success, and so I quit teaching up there for a whole year, and it didn't work very well. I was restless and unsatisfied. I wanted to get back to the teaching schedule, which wasn't so strangling and it allowed plenty of studio time, but I wanted to get back to the students. So then I was apprehensive when I left UCLA.

SL: Yes.

RD: But that worked out fine. I didn't, that time I didn't miss teaching.

SL: That's interesting. Do you think that, was that a factor of your own, of getting older, or was it a factor of your artistic path was more demanding and clearer, or. . . .

RD: I think perhaps the latter, yeah. Yeah, I think the, that I didn't really need the teaching.

SL: How many years were you at UCLA?

RD: I was there '66 to '73. Eight.

SL: So that's quite a span.

RD: Yeah.

SL: That's quite a commitment.

RD: Yeah.

SL: On that subject, just briefly, who were your favorite teachers that you had as a student, and what do you think an art teacher can do for an art student?

RD: Oh.

SL: Is that a tough question?

RD: Well, I guess the first art teacher I had was in, at Stanford when I was an undergraduate there. His name was Mendelowitz, Daniel Mendelowitz. He's known as a writer, in the. . . .

SL: Yes, art historian.

RD: Art historian, yeah. But he was a watercolorist. Very good traditional watercolorist. He was very, very good with me--and with most people. But the Stanford art department at the time was geared, I guess, more to talented women who were supplementing their cultural. . . .

SL: I see. Did you feel odd being a serious male student?

RD: A little bit, yeah. There were a couple of other men who were taking art courses. But I guess the dominant, it was dominantly women.

SL: That's often true in art departments, even now.

RD: Yeah, I guess.

SL: Many more.

RD: That's right, in UCLA. Well, at the undergraduate, I mean, anyways not so much, necessarily the graduate. So the schedule there was a relaxed one. The--I don't mean the schedule--the curriculum. Fairly polite. (both chuckle) And it was painting primarily from, from looking. From. . . . It was figure drawing and then there were classes where one would work on a still life or, or. . . . And then there was a figure class that Victor Arnautoff taught, and I guess perhaps you know that name. His name was known in San Francisco. He was a socially. . . . I can't think of the phrase I want for the kind of militant artist was on the scene in the thirties. Communist.

SL: Yeah.

RD: He was actually Russian and he retired to Kiev, where he died several years ago. He was the most, of course, the most intense of the people around there. He's not a graceful watercolorist, he. . . . There are some of his pictures in the Coit Tower in San Francisco, still, that he did on the WPA. But politically oriented and. . . .

SL: In your own teaching, were you proscriptive, or were you more inspiring by example, or did, were you, did you have a very dense, heavily constructed curriculum, or was it looser?

RD: Uh, no. [meaning it was not heavily constructed--Trans.] I guess I kind of played it by ear. And I did very little lecturing to the group because, well, I guess I feel I don't know quite who I'm talking to when I'm talking to a group out there, and I would try to keep it to discussion with individuals, in terms of their particular needs. I'm glad you caught me from rambling. I was really going on and on about Arnautoff, and. . . .

SL: Well, he's, that's interesting. That's very. . . .

RD: Did you want me to continue. . . .

SL: Well, I was trying to, let's see, without deflecting us too much from our chronological path, I wanted to get some of your ideas about what teaching art can possibly do and what perhaps it might not do. Can you teach a person to be a painter, in other words? And how much of that can you teach?

RD: Well, hmm.

SL: That's an old question, but I wonder what you thought.



RD: Sure. And I guess really an, a moot question. I think a teacher can kind of arrange things for a person who is alert and interested and presumably talented. You could kind of lead them to the, to direction, or to things that you feel will enrich what they're, be useful to them, I guess. Uh. . . .

SL: They're such a. . . . In some ways, painting is a, also problem-solving situation where you, it seems that you construct a problem for yourself, and then you solve it.

RD: Um hmm, um hmm, yes.

SL: Where you set up a situation for yourself and then you resolve it.

RD: Yes. Um hmm.

SL: And that process is something that's not easy for students to learn.

RD: Um hmm.

SL: Especially the setting up of a problem. And it seems that because, from what I've gathered from you, that that problem-solving aspect is important, that you probably, even very helpful to [you, me].

RD: Well, it's very important. And these questions are, are surprisingly unclear. I was around students and art schools most of my life, and yet there are some things I don't really know. I had to make that preamble to what I was going to say, so I've forgotten now my. . . .

SL: Um hmm.

RD: Oh, darn it, it'll come back to me.

SL: Well, it's a difficult question: How do you get from an unformed state into a mature state where you're self-directed?

RD: Yeah.

SL: And that's a big, you know, that's a big question. And perhaps it's not resolvable.

RD: There was something I wanted to say that I think was pertinent there. I. . . . I think I've lost it.

SL: Oh, that's all right, we can. . . .

RD: [whispers something] Oh, well.

SL: If it comes back, we can make a detour.

RD: Sorry.

SL: That's okay. So where did you set up your studio here in Santa Monica? It wasn't this building that we're sitting in.

RD: No, it's a building several blocks down, at Ashland and Main. It was an old brick building. How much detail do you want here?

SL: I think it would be nice to have a bit, as much as you can remember. Is that okay?

RD: Well, I was of course looking for a studio, and I spoke to Sam Francis, and he said, well, he was moving out of his, and he wasn't quite sure when, but that I could have it when he does, on the second floor, to the rear, in this building at Ashland and Main, which is now jazzed up and refurbished, and. . . . It wasn't much then.

SL: Did you come here for the physical atmosphere, to this area in particular, or was it just convenient to your home, or. . . .

RD: I knew I wanted to be on the west side, and to work out here, because of the weather, sort of the clarity. I didn't realize that it had a very special kind of light that I, I discovered later. But at any rate, I had to wait in that studio. There was a room in the center of the second floor upstairs, and quite a bit, half as large as this room, and the light was terrible. But it was okay for drawing. I didn't try and set up, do oil painting there, but I drew for, oh, about eight months, I think, and then finally Sam left, and I moved into the old back section. Incidentally, a year later, Sam came back and took the front section.

SL: (laughs)

RD: So. . . .

SL: Did you have any. . . .

RD: So we both have, we had the whole top floor then.

SL: What a dynamic duo, painting up there.

RD: Yeah. Seldom saw Sam. He was there at night; I was there in the daytime.

SL: Did you have natural light coming into that back space?

RD: Yeah, it was pretty good light. It wasn't as good as this, but it was okay.

SL: And so you drew for eight months.

RD: Um hmm.

SL: Were you drawing to make paintings?

RD: Not really, no.

SL: Were you drawing to draw?

RD: I was just drawing to, because I like to draw. And it was--I didn't realize it at the time--but I was coming to the end of the representational period and I was aware that things were flattening out and I was, the work in a good many ways was becoming more abstract, and. . . .

SL: Was there something in the [air], an influence, or something out there?

RD: I don't know. I really. . . . Well, right along, in the representational painting, I had. . . . Well, this works the other way around, too, but. . . . Oh, I don't think maybe a three-month period went by that I didn't sometime in that period go back to abstract painting and decide that I was an abstract painter again. And sometimes it would last for a day; sometimes this would last for a whole week. And then I'd go back again.

SL: Was this a conscious seesaw, or. . . .

RD: I think that I. . . . Oh, it's a little hard to say exactly what it was; it was many things really. But I think. . . . It can be as simple as this, that a painter is often getting into serious trouble with his work, and when that would happen, well, I'd say, "Well, the trouble is that I'm doing the wrong thing. I should be back where I belong--as an abstract painter."

SL: (chuckles)

RD: And this worked the other way around, too, and when I did abstract painting again, I, a good many times I [thought, when] I was going back to representation. . . . That large drawing down there, not drawing there, things that I've done out the window here. You can't see those things now because of construction across the street.

SL: These are of what time?

RD: Well, these were done sometimes here.

SL: Oh, really? So. . . .

RD: Yeah.

SL: So there's no. . . . I remember long ago, I think, in Concerning the Spiritual in Art, Kandinsky describes abstraction and figuration as two branches of the great old tree, and that they both grow out of the same source, and that they're not mutually exclusive. How do you connect the \_\_\_\_\_, [correlate, go along with] it?

RD: I have to agree with that, yeah.

SL: But pursuing two tracks simultaneously could often be very difficult as well, could it not?

RD: Impossible for me. I'm either looking in one direction or the other. They're, they, they're just. . . . I think lots of people think that becoming an abstract painter from being a representational painter might be as simple as turning the picture upside down or, you know, you're still. . . . But it's of course not. It's conceptually, emotionally. . . . They're the two major, I mean, that is the polarity for me that I've discovered in art.

SL: When you're working in one [spirit], I would think that all of your subconscious thinking and solving are directed in one direction.

RD: Um hmm.

SL: They concern a set of possibilities, and when you consider doing figuration, you would consider a whole other constellation of possibility.

RD: Sure, um hmm. [Not, About, Like] like this. This was, believe it or not, accidental. It looks so much like grass and possibly ocean and then the, and a kind of. . . .

SL: Very active sky, yes.

RD: . . . menace in the sky, and it looks as though I really intended that, but I didn't see that. I worked rather late on it last night, and got pretty upset with it and. . . . [But, Then] I didn't realize that problem until I walked in this morning. I said, "Oh, my. I've done this lovely little landscape through a

doorway." (chuckles)

SL: (laughs)

RD: And that kind of thing of course can happen, but the doing of representational problems involves the embracing of, well, as you said, a whole set of concerns and values and, well. . . .

SL: So, let's see, so you were, you had the studio in Ocean Park, and aside from Sam Francis, were there other artists in that building or in the neighborhood? That you spent time with?

RD: Yeah, Sam Amato was across the street in the same block, and Les Biller shared that studio. Then there was Jim. . . . [Remembering:] A mountain in Arizona where I've been. Oh!

SL: Turrell?

RD: Jim Turrell. Jim Turrell was up at the next corner. There's a conceptual artist on that block who I don't know very well. Still there, I think. I can't think of. . . . Oh, Tony Berlant was there, was on Second Street.

SL: Did it feel like a neighborhood of artists, or was it a place you went, did your work pretty well in. . . .

RD: Not really.

SL: Was it [Montmartre], in 1910?

RD: (laughs) No, no.

SL: No.

RD: I would see Les Biller or Sam Amato. I'd see them at school.

SL: UCLA.

RD: I'd visit their studio once in six months, I guess, and occasionally we'd have a cup of coffee or something like that, beer. And then, as I told you, Sam was there at night. And why that was, why he worked at night, [you'd] have to ask him. Jim, I visited Turrell several times.

SL: Was he making room environments then?

RD: Yeah, um hmm. It was just a nice experience [together] with that studio, because everything was arranged and. . . . I mean, one can have these feelings about that--where everything is arranged--but nevertheless, everything--well, I was going to say everything was arranged with absolute care, and so that light at a certain hour came, and at a certain time of year hit here and did such and such. It was. . . .

SL: Those were special times when people made those studios.

RD: Yes.

SL: There were [a] few of those, weren't there?

RD: Yes. There's the German woman. . . . What's her name?

SL: Oh, Maria Nordman?

RD: Yeah, Nordman, yeah.

SL: Right.

RD: She had a . . . One of the places that I visited that she did, one of her studios, was at Beethoven and \_\_\_\_\_. I forget. It was very significant to her, the intersection. Beethoven and something else that would have to do with German history or something.

SL: Very private kinds of things in a way, very special.

RD: Um hmm, yes, yes.

SL: And hard to record historically.

RD: Oh, I should say.

SL: But I think quite inspiring to many people.

RD: Yes, um hmm.

SL: Okay, and then you lived in Santa Monica? That's where you. . . .

RD: Then. . . . I lived in the rented house for a year, and then we found the house that we were in this morning. Now are you a little chilly?

[Tape 9, side B]

RD: Let's see. . . . Where were we? Interrupting can make one forget one's place. (laughter)

SL: Or being interrupted in the middle of your work by somebody asking him all these impertinent questions. So, you were drawing and you were making a whole group of drawings, and these were figurative drawings, right?

RD: Uh, yes. And I was. . . . I got to like the room very much, and it was a rectangular room with windows all the way around. It was in the center of the building. I don't know what it had been originally--some sort of a club. And it was, I think this was the kitchen area for the club, in the center, and surrounding it were. . . . There was a ballroom in the front, where Sam worked, beautiful floor. And I guess there was some sort of a lounge in the back, where I had my. . . .

SL: Most unusual.

RD: And off of my room there was a kind of. . . . What do you call it when there's a window from a kitchen into an eating area. . . .

SL: A pass-through, or something of that kind?

RD: . . . where they would pass. . . . Yeah. I keep thinking of silent butler, but it's not. . . .

SL: Oh, dumbwaiter is the one that goes up and down.

RD: Dumbwaiter. Yeah, yeah, well, there was one of those, and. . . . But this little room, which was

part of the kitchen, and the window into the big room, it was visually, it was put together in a good way, or in a way that I got to, got quite involved with drawing. So I made some drawings of that. And, so, I kept myself busy. I was really terribly anxious to get into the big studio with the light and the space, but then finally Sam left and. . . .

SL: So the paintings you title Ocean Park began in '67.

RD: Yeah, um hmm.

SL: That's right. And was there then a. . . . From the ones I have seen in person, they seem rather large.

RD: Um hmm. It started out as a. . . .

SL: Was it an enhancement of scale, that you all did? The Berkeley paintings, many of them are large, but they don't seem as large as that.

RD: But they're not nearly as. . . . No, no. No telling why, but I wanted to work roughly that size, and then my canvas, the cotton duck that I bought was 84 inches.

SL: That's pretty big.

RD: So that was three inches to turn over; that left 81. So my width was almost always 81 inches. And so then the height was what I could get out of the place, out of my . . . without doing an alteration of my door. And I could get a, well, I could manage to get a 93 out, I think. No, a 100.

SL: That's a big painting. (chuckles)

RD: Yeah. It was a relatively small, awkward hall, so 100 inches by 81 was the largest that I did.

SL: So as you set these canvases up, do you remember the. . . . Was there a switch to another sensibility, or a different vision of what you wanted to do as you set these larger canvases in a bigger space?

RD: Well, it interested me, having received the book that you just looked at [Richard Diebenkorn, by Gerald Nordland, Rizzoli, New York, 1987--SL], and I was looking at some of the late representational painting. I still, I was painting representationally when I moved into the big space.

SL: Ah hah.

RD: And I noticed, to my surprise, I realized I'd done some pretty large pieces, but they were that size. So the 81-dimension-canvas thing preceded my announcing to myself that now I was an abstract painter and approaching the canvas in that way. So the horse--or the cart came, I guess, just before the horse.

SL: It wasn't turning a page on a given day and saying, "Now I am doing this"?

RD: Well, that did happen. I. . . . And it took. It stayed, obviously.

SL: Yes.

RD: But one day, I did decide, "Well, okay, now, goodbye to all that, and. . . ." But I had said it, as I told you, a good many times before.

SL: Um hmm. And was it that you were able to achieve a group of things, one after the other, and it steadied itself?

RD: No, I think. . . . I think I just felt that I was where I should be now.

SL: Um hmm.

RD: It's the best I can say. Because it was, I guess it really wasn't like previous experiences when it wasn't, the third morning I would say, "Oh, come off of it, Dick, you're, get back where you should be." (chuckles) This time that didn't happen. So it's hard for me to say just why it stuck.

SL: Sure. The. . . .

RD: But I should think about that. I think that's a rather important question. I should be able to come up with some answers.

SL: The earliest of them seem to have larger wedges of color, that were rather strong and assertive. . . .

RD: Um hmm, um hmm.

SL: . . . and often vertical, but not always.

RD: Yes, usually vertical.

SL: And they had a kind of architecture to them that was. . . .

RD: Yes. And they were, I think, most of them were more thinly painted than later on. Less densely painted. I think they perhaps were a little more airy, more atmospheric. Do you feel that?

SL: Yes. And yet at the same time, they're very, they have a lot of bone to them, substance.

RD: Hmm.

SL: Those wedges carry from a long distance. You don't see through them. They're quite. . . .

.

RD: Umm. Um hmm.

SL: Maybe we're thinking of different paintings, but I have a feeling in mind that they're heavy with, oh, oranges and greens and very assertive colors.

RD: Yes, yes.

SL: Let's see, one of the things I wanted to ask is more of a general question, about the whole Ocean Park group of paintings. Do you feel that within this long run of work that there are certain subdivisions or episodes that suggest themselves? Switches or groups that stick together and then another group comes along?

RD: Yeah. . . .

SL: In other words, are there subsets to the larger set?

RD: I guess mainly the main difference I see is in the, is the atmospheric aspect. I don't think there was any. . . . I don't think there was any moment when I said, "I'm gonna reorient things. I'm going. . . ." I think the changes that occurred evolved, and did so piece by piece, or work by work. And. . . . This is maybe something I'll regret saying, or maybe I'll feel that I didn't mean to say it: Something that at first I thought I wanted to get away from was, in representational painting, a kind of insisting on-- which is built into representational painting. . . . If you're going to do a figure, well, you are going to do a figure, and. . . .

SL: Declare a subject.

RD: Yeah, and the arms go here, and the heads there, and it has eyes, and. . . . [When, Well] I think along with this can come a kind of need to insist, or to exert will, to. . . . It seemed like toward the end of the representational period that there were things that I, that perhaps I would have done if it weren't for the logic of a situation. I mean, the logic that I would feel that was required in this chosen subject.

SL: Um hmm.

RD: I'm making this terribly complicated; it's not complicated.

SL: Are these painterly things, or. . . .

RD: Well, an example would be, well, I suppose, gravity. I've certainly never even flirted with. Oh yes, I guess in drawings, I did, but with surrealism, or I temperamentally was very, very far from a Chagall, who can have somebody flying or upside down or. . . . There was a certain sense, a certain logic, about this figure is going to be in such and such an interior, and the light is going to be in a certain way, and it's going to be a woman, or whatever. And so it's a. . . .

SL: Did you feel bound, then, to then execute that. . . .

RD: Yeah, yeah, sure. Yeah.

SL: . . . and in the process of doing it, you had to fulfill this task that you set yourself.

RD: Either that, or I could have gone off into something else, and then why not something else, and, you know, the whole thing would break down.

SL: Sure. So the working abstractly gave you a greater freedom.

RD: Well, I thought it would. [both chuckle, meaning that it did not--Trans.] And I should have known, because I had been an abstract painter before, but it didn't work that way. But it was one of the reasons why I, one of the reasons why I wanted to change. I wanted to get away from having to follow all the obligations, so to speak, that were carried by a given subject that I would. . . . And, in brief, I suppose I just wanted more freedom. And I was continually thinking back to the abstract painting, and those years, and it seemed to me that things just flowed so freely, and it was kind of invention and--what's the word I want?--improvisation, that, which was exciting. Things would turn over for me, and. . . . Turn over and in a half an hour I could be on a different footing, and so that was. . . .

SL: So did you feel some of that as you went back into abstraction?

RD: Oh, at first, sure. [said with a smile:] But then, it doesn't take long before that totally different



set of disciplines start to, in the bad moment, start to throttle you, and so it's finally all the same thing, and. . . . But, one has moments of hope when he changes to a new scene.

SL: Speaking of which, I'm getting off my chronology, but do you expect that your geographical change, upcoming, is going to make a change in your. . . ?

RD: I'm afraid I thought of that just that instant. (chuckles)

SL: Uh huh.

RD: I'm sure it's going to be analogous to what I. . . .

SL: . . . to when you came here in '66?

RD: Well, to what I just said about a change in painting [attitude].

SL: Well, when, that freedom, that improvisation, that sense of moving and rolling and changing that you had in the fifties, say, when you came back to abstraction in the late sixties, had you changed as an artist? Was that part of the. . . .

RD: Umm. . . .

SL: Did you see the problem in similar or different ways?

RD: Oh, I think I saw them in very different ways. Umm, I'm trying to think just how. Well, for one thing, I. . . if there was anything that kept me from, that was a force that gravitated against my being an abstract painter--again--it was fear of being an abstract expressionist, going back there, but I knew that would never, that was never going to, that would never work. So I was very much, in the first couple of years of abstract painting again, I was very much on guard for. . . . I didn't want gesture, I didn't want this emotional tone that. . . .

SL: You didn't. . . . Did you not want it intellectually, or emotionally, or were you afraid of it?

RD: I think it was intellectually, mainly. And maybe saying intellectually enobles [my] thinking a little bit. It was practical. I just didn't feel that it made sense for me to go home again or, you know, become an action painter.

SL: And yet those touches and textures and improvisations are in those early abstractions.

RD: Yes, they are. Sure, yeah.

SL: But they're put into another context.

RD: Yeah. Then, there, that was the main conscious thing, was that avoidance, and then there was a return to a situation that would, could be much more fluid, more flexible.

SL: So you sought. . . . What did you grab for, to make a new situation for yourself?

RD: You mean in the sense. . . .

SL: In the abstract.

RD: . . . of subject way, or. . . .

SL: In the constructing of the whole new run of abstract work.

RD: I think I probably, at first at any rate, wanted a kind of monumental thing. I wanted something that felt large. Also, there's a thing about working large--for me at any rate, and I've found it with some other artists in talking--that in working on a what you might say is an oversize support, one is involved physically.

SL: Yeah.

RD: Involved in terms of your reach for things, and there's a different measure in this large scale, and I wanted the content to have to do with that. Now that's something that's in abstract expressionism, too, of course.

SL: Um hmm.

RD: So I was risking certain, risking going back there, by accepting this. But I guess I, having. . . . I did, toward the end, some large, there was a, there's a large seated woman, and the kind of representational restriction thwarts that physical involvement, that kind of reach, sort of.

SL: Sure. Also, just the material itself gets in the. . . . On that scale, the material is very apparent.

RD: Oh, yes; yes it is.

SL: It's the texture, the canvas, the [washes], the movement.

RD: Um hmm. And you're clearly painting on a big surface that doesn't have all the connotations of, you know, traditional window or easel painting, just. . . . Clem Greenberg always said that the new painting--the new painting at that time being abstract expressionism--was something like yearning for a wall or. . . .

SL: A mural?

RD: Hmm?

SL: Like a mural situation?

RD: Yeah, but away from easel, away from easel painting. So. . . .

SL: So almost immediately there's more of the geometric [things in there].

RD: Yes.

SL: There's more line. . . . I hate the word geometry myself, because it calls to mind something utterly dead and cold and uninteresting.

RD: Yeah, \_\_\_\_\_.

SL: And also something very unlike your work.

RD: Um hmm, um hmm.

SL: But there are verticals and diagonals and horizontals, rectangles and. . . .

RD: Yeah, sure. I have to face it: a lot of geometry came in. And I know that it. . . . I think probably initially it might. . . . I don't think I said, "Now, I'm going to use this geometry because, because it's anti-gestural or, you know, it's going to keep me out of that fifties morass." But I think it had something to do with it, the use of the geometry.

SL: It came in very, not in a locked-in way, initially it seemed. Your vertical planes often seemed to be touching or leaning, rather than interfacing or crossing, locking, as much as they did later.

RD: Um hmm, um hmm, I hope so. Yeah, yeah. [moves across room, away from microphone, to examine a painting] It's over to the left of that. That sort of whole picture should be incidental, on the left, I think. It's kind of. . . . Yeah, I'm sure that it \_\_\_\_\_ a little bit. . . .

SL: Like those.

RD: Yeah.

SL: Would [show]. In putting that together, do you remember what your sources were? In your own work, or otherwise? Were they, was it implicit in the last group of works? If one looks up at the vase there with the flowers, and one can see those angles and edges and planes. . . .

RD: Uh huh.

SL: . . . even in the drawing down below, certainly one can find it in your work, but not in quite the same way.

RD: Yes, I notice the [print] that I've painted, that [early \_\_\_\_\_] where I've drawn on down below there, that has a lot of Ocean Park orientation to it.

SL: Um hmm, it does.

RD: Well, I didn't get your question.

SL: Okay, I guess I was wondering if there was anything that sort of came into the work that hadn't already been there, at that point, to give the bone or the structure. Was there. . . .

RD: I think what came into it was that changing the discipline caused me to look at different things, caused me to dwell on different aspects of my visual experience. In the studio, in the other, the earlier studio, there were windows to the east, large windows that were. . . . Transom windows? Do you understand?

SL: Sure, with the tops that you. . . .

RD: Well, so they, they're on a pivot and they open them, you pull them out, when they go to sharp angle. And they're cut out of a larger window, which is fixed.

SL: Yes.

RD: So there's this center with the open window, which was to my right, and right back of my painting table. . . . Were you ever there?

SL: No.

RD: No. . . . there was this situation of a large, lighted rectangle, a more of a square within it, and

then, seen from the side, the transom provided the diagonal. . . . Well, there's just so many of the elements there, and I remember several more astute people who visited that studio said, "Well, look, you're painting your transom windows." (laughter)

SL: Was it. . . .

RD: So, in a sense I was. I was [ticking] that, those cues, and they were just feeding right into my, what I was doing.

SL: Do you think the. . . . You mentioned the Turrell studio, and Maria's [Nordman--Ed.] studio, and all that. Do you think any of that awareness of the architecture and the. . . . Was that in the air here, or was it just something real special in your space?

RD: I don't, I guess I don't think so. I don't think anybody around there was. . . . As a matter of fact, I didn't meet Turrell until several years before I left that neighborhood and moved up here. So I don't think so.

SL: So the chronology is off.

RD: I don't think that that. . . .

SL: I've just never been as aware of room spaces as I have since I've been in California.

RD: Uh huh.

SL: And that's, it seems studios often in New York are just spaces, and the light is pretty terrible often, and. . . .

RD: Yes.

SL: . . . they're very inward.

RD: Yes.

SL: It's just different.

RD: I understand.

SL: People almost make a fetish of their studios here sometimes, in a way that's sometimes charming and sometimes very intense.

RD: Um hmm, yes.

SL: Okay. How. . . . It's a funny question, but how long did you work on this group of paintings before you showed them, and when you did what were your feelings and the feelings that came back at you? Did you do a lot of them and then show them, or did you. . . .

RD: Yeah, I did quite a few before I showed any. You had, I noticed you had the [Nordland book--Ed.]. . . . Or I have it here.

SL: This?

RD: Yes. I'm just trying to, I [am] wanting to see which. . . . I had a show at the L.A. County Museum

and I forget what the year of that was. That would have been in it, and this I think was in it. That's '69. What was the woman's name that curated the show?

SL: I think I just, it was Grace something?

RD: Grace? I don't think her name was Grace.

SL: Well, okay.

RD: Umm, bibliography.

SL: Yeah.

RD: [I probably, it was \_\_\_\_\_ they] skipped. Oh, boy.

SL: Was this part of it? Does this belong to you?

RD: This is group exhibition, and I am in the group exhibition.

SL: Oh, I see.

RD: Well, there wasn't really a catalogue, so... [leafing further] Okay, this should have it. Sixty... It doesn't have the woman's name. Los Angeles County Museum... No, that's late fifties at the Ferus [Gallery--Ed.]. Sixty-eight... I'm sorry this thing is buzzing in my head and...

SL: That's okay. It won't take long.

RD: (sighs) Well, the first show was at the County, and it had about eight paintings, I think. And the next show was...

End Tape 9

[Tape 10, side A]

[Tape 10, side A]

SL: I was just looking at that catalogue this morning. There was a name there I didn't recognize at the the L.A. County..

RD: Grace what...

SL: I don't know. I'm just trying to remember this from this morning when I thought, "Well, I wonder who that is?" And... Because, monographs, perhaps... Gail! Gail Scott.

RD: Gail! Gail Scott. That's who I'm thinking of, yes, yes.

SL: That was the name that I didn't remember.

RD: When you said Grace, I thought, "Well, she's thinking of Grace Glueck."

SL : No, no, it started with a "G" and that's all I remembered.

RD: No. Gail Scott, yeah, yeah. I liked her a lot. I wonder where she's gone.

SL: I looked at it and I thought, "This is before I was here, so I didn't know her and she was. . . ."

RD: Um hmm.

SL: So. And it was called New Paintings of Richard Diebenkorn.

RD: Yeah.

SL: And it went, was it work just since you came to Southern California?

RD: Yeah. Well, it was the first Ocean Park paintings.

SL: And you called them that, at that time?

RD: Um hmm. Called them that right from the beginning. Because that titling of abstract painting I had used before: Berkeley # . . . , and Albuquerque # . . . , or Urbana # . . . .

SL: Which is often not thought about. I think that's good you pointed that out, that. . . .

RD: Oh, rather than naming the picture after more specific characters, you know.

SL: Yes. That's important to keep that in mind.

RD: It's really the name of the place rather than place itself. Yeah.

SL: Good. One thought clarifies a lot.

RD: Yes.

SL: You had a show at Poindexter, also that same season, in '61, it says here?

RD: Yeah. Yes. Yes, I did.

SL: And how were they perceived back in New York?

RD: Umm, pretty well. I don't think I got any really bad reviews, but I don't think I . . . . Let's see. Well, the only one in New York would be Poindexter, right?

SL: Yes. And then there was '71 at Marlborough, but that's already a couple of years along.

RD: Now wait a minute. The '71 at Marlborough, I did have a very bad review, but that was.

SL: What idiot would have written a bad review? (chuckles)

RD: Ahh, what's his name? He would. . . .

SL: No matter what you show, you can always find a bad review somewhere, really.

RD: (laughs) Oh this was terrible!

SL: Really?

RD: It was called, it was in the. . . . Gerald Lanes wrote it, but he did so in, he did the piece in conjunction with the editor, and the editor. . . . It was Art Forum.

SL: Really!

RD: And who was the guy's. . . .

SL: [Phillip--SL] Lieder?

RD: No, no. I had shows earlier with very good reviews from Lieder.

SL: I would think so.

RD: A man with a beard, and he was a big deal. He came down to L.A.

SL: [John--SL] Coplans?

RD: Coplans, yes.

SL: Right, uh huh, uh huh.

RD: And the reason I know it's Coplans is because Coplans hung around my studio a lot, and I knew, when I was doing representational painting in Oakland, San Francisco, Berkeley, and I knew all his attitudes, all his phrases and things, and they came out in this Gerald Lanes' "Cloudy skies over Ocean Park" [Artforum 10 (Feb. 1972): 61-63--SL]

SL: Huh!

RD: It was just devastating review. It just killed me. It just. . . .

SL: It did bug you?

RD: Oh my. . . . Really bothered me, really just smarted.

SL: Ohh. . . .

RD: A long time.

SL: What did they accuse you of?

RD: What didn't they? (laughter)

SL: Was it. . . .

RD: It was. . . .

SL: Oh, go ahead.

RD: Well, no, I. . . . Yeah.

SL: Was it that you were combining things, rather than being in a doctrinaire inevitable-next-step mode. . . .

RD: Oh, God. [thinking hard--Trans.]

SL: . . . of modernist progress?

RD: They were. . . . You're going to go out and read this, I know. (laughs)

SL: Sure, of course.

RD: Well, he spoke of my, the construction, lines that went off somewhere and stopped, and there was no sense to this, and the color was, had no presence--it was cloudy and. . . .

SL: That's strange.

RD: And he compared me at one point to [Kenneth--SL] Noland and [Richard--SL] Anuskievicz. He said something to the effect that it's like comparing a shark to a goldfish, or something like that.

SL: Oh, heavens!

RD: Oh, it was dreadful.

SL: Well, I was going to ask you, at that point, at least--maybe even just a few years earlier--there was, there was the rise of hard-edge painting, of all of that type of very. . . .

RD: Oh, yes, ah hah!

SL: . . . flat, clearly defined. . . .

RD: Yeah. So this was flaccid. He was applying hard-edge standards, yes.

SL: It sounds like it.

RD: Of course. That would, of course it was that.

SL: Doesn't it? That it was very, absolutely physical, non-metaphoric. . . .

RD: Um hmm, right.

SL: . . . literalist. . . .

RD: \_\_\_\_\_, yes.

SL: All the things that your work wasn't.

RD: Yeah. That's it, absolutely, yeah, yeah.

SL: When you look at that work, did you, were you aware that that was being touted as the. . . . It was sort of the last gasp, I think--we're seeing it in retrospect--as the last gasp of faith in the inevitable next step, of ever more flat, ever more literal, ever more. . . .

RD: Yes, yes.

SL: Did you have any feelings about that work, or about that mindset when you were painting?

RD: Uhhh. . . . I was avoiding it as much as I was attempting to avoid (chuckles) the abstract



expressionist tendency.

SL: Um hmm. Was that a personal preference according to one's own sensibility, or was it intellectual decision, or. . . .

RD: I think it was in terms of my sensibility, really, of my, I didn't have to avoid very stringently. I'm not a hard-edge painter. I'm. . . . [speaks very softly:] Something else I wanted to say.

SL: It's interesting how often young--getting sort of back to students--young people are told to keep in touch with the currents in their time, to be very aware of where you are positioning yourself with regard to critical discourse. . . .

RD: Yes.

SL: . . . and work being done, and that, how your career strategy as an artist. . . .

RD: Oh yes, yes.

SL: . . . all these concepts of what one is to do.

RD: Yeah. I know. I know those. [Editor: The preceding are not redundant.--Trans.] I never said that in my teaching. Although I kind of assumed that students, good ones, would be, and they did, always. And so I could always see the evidence of what they were looking at outside, outside the studio.

SL: Do you think at a certain point in one's career it doesn't matter too much, or you're not, that isn't a problem any more?

RD: Now what would you say the problem is?

SL: That when you're starting out and you're trying to place yourself, somehow, in the continuum of what's been done and what is to be done. . . .

RD: Oh sure, yes.

SL: That that's very important to be aware of it at that moment, as well as of your own resources and your own sensibility and. . . .

RD: I think there wants to be and, with the best people, there's going to be a balance between those two things, and that I would just assume. And, of course, as one proceeds one finds himself, and I think that, that it's been pointed out amply that the young artist produces pastiche. Of course he does, and it's expected.

SL: Well, after you've found yourself, and you have a sureness about who you are and where you're going, how do you relate to that critical discourse out there that lights on one thing at one point, and then on another, and on another? Or do you not worry about it?

RD: Well, I haven't really, haven't really worried about it very much, actually. You're meaning. . . .

SL: Well, it's as though at any given moment something is taken up as being the most important thing. . . .

RD: Yeah, sure.

SL: . . . and touted a lot and shown a lot and written about and that becomes the zeitgeist of the time. Then it becomes something else.

RD: Well, I think it's important to stay in touch, of course. And I've stayed in touch along with any of my peers, colleagues. And yet I do know that there are people who, there are artists who obsessively stay in touch, you know. They're at all the galleries and, you know, you see them anywhere there's a, art is shown they're there, and you can kind of see their wheels turning and they're taking notes and they're. . . . There are just those people.

SL: Yeah. It seems to me though that the attention of that almost media-based world shifts and turns its head in one direction and another direction and another direction.

RD: Oh, yes, continually.

SL: And often the one who is working along, it turns its attention to that person all of a sudden, so the light shines on and they think, "Who, me?" you know. (chuckles)

RD: Oh yes.

SL: And then it passes on to the next thing.

RD: Yes, um hmm, sure.

SL: And at a certain level of accomplishment and seriousness that it would seem that that kind of collision between hard-edge and expectations of what you were doing wouldn't matter.

RD: Hmm.

SL: If you say, "Oh well, I know what they're expecting and I don't, I'm not that."

RD: Yes.

SL: "I'm something else."

RD: You're saying it for me. That's wonderful!

SL: Yeah, I guess I shouldn't. That's bad.

RD: No. (laughs) But you said it very well, so I'm not objecting.

SL: But there's a sort of state of grace in that, if what's going on is being really worked at, really worked hard at.

RD: Um hmm. Now I have to follow that: "If what's being worked at"?

SL: Well, I think that--once again, just my feelings about what you're doing is that you were making your own progress toward your own ideal. . . .

RD: Yes.

SL: . . . and that it, if it didn't coincide with [at] that moment in Art Forum, it didn't matter, because you were going off somewhere else.

RD: Oh, absolutely. But it just has to be that way, I think.

SL: And then eventually, when it was seen what you had done, it was thought it was a good thing to have done, and so that's. . . .

RD: Unfortunately it doesn't always happen. There's plenty of time when it just doesn't happen.

SL: Right.

RD: An artist goes off on following his lights, and just sorta gets lost out there somewhere, and it probably happens that way more than the other, and so it's, there's a risky thing, you know, and one is, I think an artist is continually aware of being--I don't mean to be romantic now--but one is aware of being alone and getting off on your own limb and all the doubts and whatnot that accompany doing that. Inevitable, I guess.

SL: It's almost like you're only as good as your last painting, that sort of feeling.

RD: Hmm, yeah.

SL: I think artists feel that much more than people who look at an artist would.

RD: Oh, I would think so, yes.

SL: Because I think the person looks at the artist's work. "The last painting's there, yes, but there's everything else." (chuckles)

RD: Hmm, um hmm.

SL: "And the last painting's good to see, but the rest is there as background. . . ."

RD: Yes.

SL: ". . . where maybe the artist doesn't feel it that way." He may think I was going to change that. But it's done and belongs to the viewer's experience. Let's see, where were we? So, in, into the 1970s, especially in the early seventies, as an observer, it seemed that the paintings gained a certain openness, and they weren't as heavily densely structured as some of the notable ones that I remember.

RD: Um hmm.

SL: I was just wondering, what was going on in your work as you saw it in the seventies. Anything different at all from that starting point in the late sixties? And did make any changes, and did you. . . . You left UCLA from the teaching situation?

RD: Oh yes, um hmm.

SL: And was that prompted by feeling good about what you were doing?

RD: No, the. . . . You knew about my leaving UCLA. I, you just have to know about that. That was. . . .

SL: Did you, was there a struggle between the demands of your work, your painting work, and the demands of the teaching situation? Did it get to be much to teach after a while?

RD: Well, there was a particular set of requirements that that school uniquely--pretty much uniquely, I think (chuckles)--set up, and it, well, it just became so ridiculous that I, \_\_\_\_\_ the obsession with. . . . I guess I've still a little bit of emotion. It's sort of. . . . [RD near tears through much of this passage--Trans.]

SL: Demands on your time, or busywork, or. . . .

RD: Yes. Continual self-examination of this department, which became this terrible system, which became all-important to so many of the people, and. . . .

SL: Too much to allow you to make work of your own?

RD: Yes. Meetings that accomplished nothing, or examined angels on the [head of a pin].

SL: Academic world.

RD: Oh, this just, just awful, and so finally I said that I wanted out. Actually, I shouldn't be, I'd never, I really decided that when I left I was not going to, there would be no recrimination \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_.

SL: Sure.

RD: I'm not going to tell stories, or. . . .

SL: Fine. Which we don't need for this, but suffice it to say that it was taking up too much of your time unproductively, or. . . .

RD: Yeah, I guess so.

SL: Or we might. . . .

RD: And, well, it was continually making me angry. I couldn't, I was. . . .

SL: Did you miss the teaching when you left there?

RD: Uh, not really, no. That took. I mean, being no longer a teacher.

SL: Sure. And when you had all of your time in the studio, was that odd, or was it all right?

RD: That was all right. All right with me.

SL: It was all right by that time.

RD: Yes, yes. Right.

SL: And that was '73?

RD: That was '73, that I, when I left. \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_. Well, anyway, I don't want to go into that situation.

SL: Well, I think most anyone who's been in academic life knows what you're talking about, pretty much.

RD: Well, some schools are better than others, I know. Some that I've been around. I know that the

University of Illinois, where I was, for a year, I . . . Low man on the totem pole there, I wasn't involved in the politics, and I just observed. In that way, it was just dreadful, the backbiting and all the time. (chuckles)

SL: Well, it's often said that in academic life everyone fights harder and harder about less and less.

RD: Yeah, yes, yes.

SL: And it's like. . . .

RD: Oh, it was bitter, just bitter. It was terrible. Hatred. Ooh, God, what one. . . . There was less of that at UCLA, less. . . . Oh, no, there was that, too, but what was so terrible at UCLA was just the . . . the silly little system became all-important, and. . . .

SL: Well then, you. . . .

RD: So the students really suffered. That was another thing that, that was mostly--when I said I would be angry--to see what happened to the students. They were caught in between. It was. . . .

SL: That makes one feel as a teacher that. . . . It's almost like being a salesman or a front person for a product that you can't support anymore.

RD: Umm, um hmm.

SL: And to keep your own integrity, you just can't do it, you just have to leave.

RD: Right. Yes, yes. So that was it.

SL: So, then you had your time. Did suddenly the \_\_\_\_\_ intensity or anything of your work change when you had all that time, all the resources of your life?

RD: I don't know. I guess the only way I can answer that is to look at a, look and see these works, and try to recall what was going on in my life at the time, because maybe some artists are much more self-aware than I am, but this is something I'm not looking at when I'm working: how am I, how am I changing. I'm changing; I'm interested in what I want to do. Now. And I just, I'm not aware of changes until some overview, some hindsight later, I say, "Oh boy! I really shifted things there." Well, that's with anything. It isn't clearly that. There are certainly times when I was aware that I want to bring such and such to my work, or cut something out, or, you know, that sort of thing. But any of the big changes just sort of happen kind of imperceptibly.

SL: Um hmm, [over time]. So you were. . . .

RD: So if I'm asked from one year to the next, "What are you trying to do," well, it's pretty much the same thing, within this, within the abstract period.

SL: You don't set a task on January 1 and hope to achieve it by December 31?

RD: I certainly don't. And then I talk about these drawings here, where I, it's really very, very difficult for me to know a '51 from a '55. And especially with drawings that I have. . . . The average time on one of those sketches is possibly 15 minutes, and then I've put 'em away in a portfolio, until I've taken them out now, so. . . .

SL: It isn't a long acquaintance, would you say?

RD: No.

SL: That was another, perhaps a silly question, but I was wondering, in the large Ocean Park paintings, how long do you generally keep them around before they're out in the world? From the beginning of when they're thought about and worked on till you decide, "Well, this one, this one's ready to go out in the world."

RD: Well that's, that has entirely to do with the canvas itself. It was very, very. . . . Well, I guess never in Ocean Park has there been a one-day painting, from blank canvas to finish. They're probably almost no two-day paintings. I think there are a few week, five days.

SL: Uh huh.

RD: Others have maybe gone on for a year. Some I've worked on for perhaps six months and then dropped, and then come back to several months later. Some pictures, when I've gathered work together to head for a show, one or two don't make it, so. . . .

SL: What happens to them? They get left at home?

RD: Well, they sit around and then finally get worked on again, but later, so. . . .

SL: Do they change into, are they rehabilitated, or do they become another painting of a totally other moment, go on in another way?

RD: Well, and that depends on the canvas, too. Sometimes they just get realized, finished--I think they are at any rate. Other times they just turn over completely. I look at them and say, "My god, what was I, what was the bind, why was I so torn up and stopped and, you know, blocked?" And I can just see that the technique is blasting powder (laughter) rather than steady struggle.

SL: I think many years ago, when we did another interview, you described that there were often little bits that you just get really attached to and you don't want to give up?

RD: Oh yes, sure, yes. And those, those parts disappear when you see them, when you see them later.

SL: \_\_\_\_\_.

RD: And I think that's what's called, should be called sentimentality in one's work, in one's working. [If--Ed.] a piece is good at a certain stage, well, then, everything changes around it, and you still think it's good, but it was only good in the first place because of its relationship to all the stuff that's gone, so. . . . (chuckles)

SL: But you get real attached to it.

RD: Uh, yeah, it's still good, you still think it's good. I mean, there's so much delusion in painting.

SL: It almost sounds like a process of metamorphosis. It takes one form and then another. Is that, am I reading that right?

RD: Well, yeah, that's. . . . Often it is that way, yes.

SL: But is it like a continual flow, or are there stages in the making of a work that it's set up as this and. . . .

RD: It's certainly not a continual flow. But I'm wondering if I could describe how a picture often goes. I guess often the first day is terribly boring. It used to be, when I was younger, it used to be more exciting because I had lots more illusions and hopes and. . . .

(both chuckle)

SL: Uh huh.

RD: . . . and have this initial idea. I didn't know yet that initial ideas were thin and often banal, and so I'd be really excited at first.

SL: Uh huh.

RD: So later on, more into my maturity, the first days were just getting something down, and very boring.

SL: That's. . . .

RD: So. But then, but then--and somehow I feel that if I outline this, what has happened is never going to happen again. It's sort of a superstition, but I'm going to go ahead anyhow. So then the next thing is maybe on the second day, I'm still, it just looks terrible, but I'm working on it and trying to answer some of the, of its requirements or its demands, and then something sort of falls into place somewhere, and this I guess would have to be known as "The plot thickens" or "starts to thicken."

SL: Uh huh, and you start to get excited and interested.

RD: And any good novel from the nineteenth century, at any rate, it always was thirty pages of dreadful bore before you, before it started to be anything worth. . . . And that is true. Is it true with you? I find that. . . .

SL: Oh, it's almost like they're testing the reader for its seriousness.

RD: . . . Stendhal and Flaubert and all those really good writers are terribly hard for the first few chapters.

SL: Dostoevski.

RD: Oh, yes, yes. Yeah. So there was real tolerance with the, that thing which is necessary creative. There is something left out now, when things have to start with a bang, because things don't. But anyway, okay, so the plot thickens, and then I get on to something and then I carry it on its way, until somehow I, there's a sort of a nice momentum picking up, and then I trip and fall. And then, you know, disaster. And then. . . .

SL: Is it that you thought you were going to get to the end and you don't get to the end?

RD: Quite possibly, quite possibly, yeah, yeah. Or I just wasn't able to sustain. . . . However it might happen.

SL: Or when you get there, it isn't what you expected that it would be?

RD: Yes, sure, yes. So then, then there's this sort of block period. . . .

SL: Which must be a lot of fun.

RD: . . . which is like pulling teeth, and looking at the picture and thinking, "Well, okay, I'm going to do this," and I start to get out the chair, and then I say, "No, I think it would be better if I did exactly the opposite." And so I say, "Well," so then I sit down in the chair again. (laughs)

SL: "How we gonna resolve this?"

RD: Yes. (laughing) We got two things and then so that's a block that sets in and. . . This is just a sort of general, very general, description.

SL: That was just very vivid and very interesting. So how. . . .

RD: So then. . . .

[Tape 10, side B]

SL: . . . block.

RD: Yes. (both chuckle) So, well, at this time, I've put a lot of time into this thing, and it's not panning out, and a kind of desperation sets in, and maybe even despair. And, you know, things like, "I can't paint anymore," and. . . Well then, with the despair thing--or sometimes it happens another way, where I just, things don't work, and I get angry. Really furious. Well, in both these things, I think, the despair and the anger, just as sometimes one can just get sort of, you know, "The hell with it." It's so terrible, I [can't, can] do anything." Well, all these things, different states, are different, really different states from your rational, your set, your serious-minded, "I'm going to do a painting and I'm going to do the right thing on this canvas." In one case, it's even cynical: "Just, you know, do it without looking, just smear it, and. . . ."

SL: It's a very dramatic, emotional situation.

RD: Or another, the anger, you're so blind that you're doing, you're bringing resources to bear that ordinarily, that you never see, unless you're really in a rage. Or. . . . What was the first one?

SL: Despair?

RD: The despair, yeah. Well then, then you're seeing things in a totally different way too. And that's. . . . The trouble is--and this is where I really feel bad about talking about this, because it's like I'm knowing something, but I shouldn't. . . .

SL: You watch yourself do this?

RD: . . . I shouldn't know these things.

SL: Uh huh.

RD: And as long as you're knowing, as long as you're saying, you know, "When are you going to get really angry, or when are you going to get really intense in one way or another?" Forget it. Forget it.

SL: It's like saying, "I'm going to tickle you," or something, then you're not ticklish.

RD: Yeah, yeah.



SL: If this process has happened again and again, and you are aware of it, and you know yourself pretty well, you possibly might tell yourself, "Oh, it'll all be all right. I know I'll get out of this."

RD: Sure.

SL: And then you're not going to get it. . . .

RD: And that just slows things down a bit. (chuckles)

SL: Yeah.

RD: It takes longer to get angry, or to despair, or. . . .

SL: Well, the subtext of that is that this matters very much.

RD: Hmm.

SL: This is very deeply important.

RD: Um hmm.

SL: You don't get angry about something that isn't important.

RD: Oh, right, exactly, sure.

SL: So in some ways that says something about what the painting means?

RD: [Could] possibly.

SL: Or the act of painting or being. . . . It's a very important issue, then, isn't it?

RD: I think it. . . .

SL: It's not just something you do during the day.

RD: Oh, absolutely, sure, yes. I thought that was sort of. . . .

SL: Understood?

RD: . . . understood, yeah.

SL: Yes, right.

RD: But then in this, then, along with being blind with anger, you can also go right by what you were really trying to put together too, so that's, that happens also.

SL: Then you're really in another place, aren't you, like taking the wrong stop on a subway; you're off in another district and you're not going to get back; it's hard to get back.

RD: Yeah. Yeah. So maybe the process all has to build up again. Umm.

SL: And yet. . . .

RD: And let me say one more thing about this process. What has often happened, and I. . . . You

know, I've never, I've always been very wary of describing this before in this process, but sometimes the way they stop is that I get, I'm terribly involved, possibly just headlong involved--not really despairing or angry or--and working late and finally feeling, "Well, it's just no use. No use whatsoever," and just quitting. And then coming back the next day--or what's interesting is, if for some reason or other, I have to go on a trip or something, and I don't come back for a week or ten days, and come back and come into the room, and suddenly I see that it's there, and I know instantly that this, it is what I wanted. And I guess what has happened is that I've become so acutely involved that it's almost like nothing can be right, but it, or it's sort of I'm splitting hairs all over the place and it's simply terrible because it isn't quite, you know, that it's, "This line is a quarter inch off," or "That shade of color is just a little bit, just a hair wrong." And then finally those--what's the word I want--those tolerances aren't that important really. They. . . .

SL: They, if they thwart the whole reality of what's there, then they don't, they're not as important, is that what. . . .

RD: Well, what I'm meaning to say is that with, in a state where they are desperately important, then they are, but I can't see that I've got what I want, because of my involvement. And the objective look doesn't bring with it all this concern with these tolerances and I can see clearly that it was there.

SL: But you've wound yourself down into a tiny little place, and you can't really see the big picture.

RD: Yeah, yeah. Right.

SL: And yet, you know, people who see your work--and I get armies of students who are just typical viewers, I think--and they love your work, because it gives them such a feeling of, oh, they describe things like joyfulness, clarity, amplitude, openness.

RD: All those nice things. (chuckles)

SL: All these feelings of, you know, soaring. All these kinds of not exactly calm, but capable feelings, feelings of great capability and great joy, which seems so different from that process you're describing. [Car outside playing "attention" sounds!--Trans.]

RD: That's great. (chuckles)

SL: When you look at your work, do you feel any of those things?

RD: \_\_\_\_\_.

SL: Does it, when it is resolved, do people's reaction. . . . I mean, maybe the reactions that I get from my students are atypical, but I think they're typical of a lot of people I've ever heard describe what they got from being with your work.

RD: Oh, I have this often, where a person looks at a picture that I know came out of, came close to my throat being cut (laughs), and this person is saying, just, "Oh, how lovely," you know.

SL: Yeah.

RD: And, well, there are lots of, there are lessons there. . . .

SL: Yes, I think so. It reminds me a bit of. . . .

RD: . . . and as to regarding our fellow people \_\_\_\_\_ human beings, \_\_\_\_\_ can say. . .

SL: It reminds me a bit of Matisse's line about the, you know, the artist does the work and resolves the things to be resolved so then the viewer looks at it he feels well put together and gives you a feeling of satisfaction, all of that.

RD: Uh huh.

SL: It probably isn't exactly the same thing, but just [drops something or claps hands--Trans.]-- Oh, excuse me. Some of those aspects of struggle are very much on the surface. But I suspect that there's something, there's a part of it that might be similar.

RD: Oh, I think so. Yes.

SL: One sees in his work also little awkwardnesses. . . .

RD: Oh yes, I should say.

SL: . . . that he intentionally leaves in there.

RD: Yes, yes.

SL: That speak of the reality of what it was to make that happen.

RD: And incredible--I was going to say gestures, but no--acts that. . . . Like maybe scraping half of the paint off--and scraping it off with considerable violence, as though he's gotta get that paint off. But there it's so incredible that he would have the insight to realize that that something that he's done, something to, you know, this essentially nineteenth-century man is aware that. . . .

SL: That it's not something to hide, as though. . . .

RD: Yeah, or quickly paint over like most, like just about every other painter, a salon painter. You know, this would have been a pretty monstrous thing to have done, what. . . . Even if he painted it over again. This thing that Matisse is presenting as. . . .

SL: Here it is.

RD: . . . as is, my painting.

SL: A lot like the, that last touring show from the Soviet Union had the magnificent painting of the man in the striped pajamas, and sitting in the chair.

RD: Oh, yes, yes.

SL: And the whole left half of it, as I recall, had that kind of overpainting, it was painted again. . . .

RD: Um hmm, um hmm.

SL: . . . and part of the old painting is showing through, as well as the new transparent skin.

RD: Oh yes, yes.

SL: And it was truly, at first a little disturbing and then it made the painting very real.

RD: Oh yes, indeed.

SL: Made it much more than illustration or something.

RD: Yes, yeah.

SL: But anyway, I just find that paradox interesting, [too, to you, to me]: Your process and how the result affects people, very different.

RD: Um hmm.

SL: Okay, let's see what else I have here. Let's see, well, do we. . . .

RD: Where are we?

SL: [Whispers:] My god, it's twelve-thirty!

RD: Twelve-thirty, ooh.

SL: That's terrible. I think I've gone through pretty much what I need to do. Okay, just two things.

RD: Okay.

SL: Throughout your career, but it seems quite a bit of late, you've done work in other media: prints and etchings--and lithography as well?

RD: Yeah. Mainly etching, [intaglio].

SL: Mainly etchings. Where does that fit into your career, say since 1970? How do you see that in that activity?

RD: Umm, kind of relief, change of pace.

SL: Does it turn up things in. . . .

RD: [You tend], to go. . . . A different medium altogether can really be kind of liberating. I think maybe I told you the last time about the times when I've, the several times in my life when I decided that I was a sculptor and worked on sculpture for ten days or so, and thought, "No more painting. I've found myself." Because it was so exciting.

SL: Sure, \_\_\_\_\_.

RD: And then, then when I started getting into trouble with painting--I stay with it in spite of the trouble--but as a young sculptor now (chuckles) when I get into trouble, "No, no. I'm going back to painting." (laughing)

SL: You push through that as, you get the same situation.

RD: Well, for doing prints, it's, can often be. . . . And I do prints for, for that medium. I guess I like a lot to work with metal, with metal plates, much less with lithography, because that is, that's involved with chemistry.

SL: Do you like the interaction with people, like those kinds of shop situations?

RD: Yeah, that's another change, too. If they're sympathetic people that you're working with, that's good. I'm trying to think what else might be different. Well, working in a different place.

SL: Is your imagery different?

RD: Somewhat. I can't tell how and why, except I would expect it to be because it's such a different, such a different situation, and then a medium usually changes one's imagery.

SL: And the scale? They are smaller.

RD: Yeah, and the scale.

SL: Are they more analogous to your drawings?

RD: I think so, yeah. Although there's a big difference there, too.

SL: Again, if I knew more, I would have better questions to ask.

RD: Oh.

SL: Okay, last question. You're about to move again.

RD: Yes.

SL: And where are you going and when and why and what sort of physical environment will you have?

RD: Well, the best thing I can, best reasons I can give for leaving here. . . . Well. . . . I guess I'm feeling kind of claustrophobia, and I think the pace that I once found very exciting is, I feel that I've, well, I've just sort of had it with that.

SL: Sure.

RD: And where I'm going is in the country, and. . . .

SL: What is the city? Or the community?

RD: It's near Healdsburg [California--SL].

SL: Near Healdsburg.

RD: It's seven miles from Healdsburg. And it's just glorious country. (laughs)

SL: Uh huh. Is it all green and lush, or. . . .

RD: Well, now it is, yeah. And it's Alexander Valley, so it's a lot of grape to be seen, vineyards. And there are mountains, and there's Mount St. Helena out the front door.

SL: Goodness, yeah.

RD: So it's very peaceful.

SL: Have you ever lived in the country before?

RD: Yeah, in. . . . Let's see, when Phyllis and I went to Albuquerque for the first half of our Albuquerque stay, we lived--it was really on the outskirts of Albuquerque where we lived, but then it was pretty much country. It was a stone's throw from the river, from the Rio Grande. And it was-- maybe we talked about this before--there was this mesa across the river, [that formed this line], and the house that we lived in was a small caretaker's house, in a pasture, with cattle and horses and, well, it was country.

SL: So you have a barn, you said?

RD: Hmm?

SL: You were telling me on the phone, you have a barn?

RD: Have a barn, and it's, the architect is presumably going to get, the plans are made now, and they're going to start right away, I believe. So I have high hopes.

SL: That's great.

RD: Yeah.

SL: Very exciting. So you will be leaving this studio, this one up. . . .

RD: I'm going to keep the studio for a while. And, or I may just keep the building, I don't really know. Yeah. I guess that's it.

SL: So you're. . . . No more commuting back and forth, hmm?

RD: You mean highway five.

SL: Yeah, right.

RD: No, I hope little of. . . .

SL: No, I meant the, along the ocean and. . . .

RD: Oh, no, no, \_\_\_\_\_.

SL: You'll be right on the premises?

RD: Yeah, and I've looked forward to that. That's another change I want to make.

SL: Sure.

RD: Because it's been years and years since I've painted where I worked meant where he lives--SL]. And it's makes for different patterns, different. . . .

SL: Sure. Makes for a different day, I would think.

RD: Oh yes. And often there are things that I want to do. I have this itch to be working on something, and I really have only two hours when I'm home, and then I think, "Well, it's going to take me fifteen minutes to get down here, and I'm going to have to get fifteen to get home. I'll just get

started when I get down here, what. . . ." So I won't come. And if I'm working with my studios at home while I'm there. . . .

SL: Sounds good.

RD: . . . then go out to the studio in my pajamas or whatever.

SL: Any time of the day or night? Any time you want?

RD Yes, yes.

SL: That's great.

RD: So, I'm hopeful.

SL: Okay. That's a good, I think that's a perfect way to end our interview.

**End of Session 4**

**End of Interview**

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