



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Frank S. Okada,  
1990 Aug. 16-17

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

**Contact Information**

Reference Department  
Archives of American Art  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D.C. 20560  
[www.aaa.si.edu/askus](http://www.aaa.si.edu/askus)

# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Frank Okada on August 16, 1990. The interview took place in Seattle, Washington, and was conducted by Barbara Johns for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[Editor's note: The transcript has been edited for content. A verbatim transcription is on file.]

## Interview

[Tape 1, side A]

BARBARA JOHNS: [This is Barbara Johns]. I'm meeting with Frank Okada at my home. It's Thursday, August 16. This is an interview for the Archives of American Art, the Northwest Asian American Project. Morning, Frank.

FRANK OKADA: Morning.

BARBARA JOHNS: Let's start at the beginning, because your history is one both in Seattle and in Oregon, and New York and other places. You were born in 1931 in Seattle. Can you tell me about your family, your parents' background, perhaps?

FRANK OKADA: Well, my parents were from Hiroshima, I believe it's a smaller, kind of rural community. I think it's called Nakashima-ken, but I'm not sure. And they came probably right after the First World War. My father had come earlier, like near '13 or '14, and worked on the railroad gangs in Montana, and then he went back and married my mother and brought her back. And all his life, with the exception of the Second World War, when they were relocated, he ran a small skid road hotel. And I think he ran, during his lifetime, three different locations.

BARBARA JOHNS: Did he own these, or was he the manager?

FRANK OKADA: No, he generally leased a building and ran these hotels. The [clients] were mostly bachelors, people who worked road gangs or people in heavy manual labor.

BARBARA JOHNS: And were these Japanese Americans?

FRANK OKADA: Most of them were Caucasians. I understand my brother John was born in the Merchant Hotel, which is down there off the square [Pioneer Square—Ed.], and I believe I was born in the Yakima Hotel, which is now the Salvation Army hotel—down there off of Dearborn? Sixth and Dearborn, it's across the street from the Crescent Spice. Then after the Second World War, [when] he came back, a hotel called the Pacific Hotel, which is on Sixth and Weller, which is just south of Uwajimaya [a Japanese department store—Ed.]. They tore that down and they built this Chinese restaurant kind of thing. And so that's what he did most of his life till he retired.

BARBARA JOHNS: Were the owners of these hotels Caucasian or Asian?

FRANK OKADA: I know the Yakima Hotel, the owner was Caucasian, but Pacific Hotel, one of his older friends, a Japanese friend, had owned the hotel.

BARBARA JOHNS: Had he intended to immigrate originally?

FRANK OKADA: Well, I think most of the people, when they initially came, I think many of them thought that they would make their fortune and go back and retire. But I think the war years sort of made them change. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: I was thinking of your brother's book [John Okada, *No-No Boy*, first published 1957] that I recently read.

FRANK OKADA: He [FO's father—Ed.] felt that as we matured and made kind of different commitments, that he knew none of us would be going back to his home. You know, as eldest son, the farm would be his, because my grandfather owned a very large farm, relative for Japan. Traditionally it would have gone to my oldest brother. See, the property moves from. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: Your father was an eldest son?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. And so his eldest son would receive it and his younger brothers wouldn't, or something like that. I think that's the way it goes. But he knew that none of us were going to go back and plant horseradishes

and do things like that [chuckles], so he gave it to his younger brother. I think my brother John went there once, and I've been there maybe about three times. I go out there, and I can't see any of my family running out there and weeding turnips.

BARBARA JOHNS: Was this typical that an elder son would immigrate? I often associate it with younger sons who don't have an inheritance.

FRANK OKADA: I don't know how that occurred, but I think it was a matter of making some money and going back maybe to establish a business or expand the farm or whatever. He just figured that all his children would probably just live and die in the States—which is fine with me.

BARBARA JOHNS: He was pretty young then to have worked on the railroad gangs.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, he was like fourteen—thirteen, fourteen—when he [arrived—Ed.].

BARBARA JOHNS: Did he come with his parents, or come alone?

FRANK OKADA: I think my grandfather was a foreman, and brought him over. My memory of this is not very accurate. Because it's word of mouth or what he said to me, or looking at old family photos, or something, that you sort of put it together. Visiting my grandfather's home in Hiroshima, there.

BARBARA JOHNS: So your grandfather and your father had immigrated.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah.

BARBARA JOHNS: Did your grandfather stay here, or did he return?

FRANK OKADA: No, he went back, probably in the 1920s or something and he never came back. I guess he just ran the farm.

BARBARA JOHNS: Do you have any idea how long your father was over here when he was a teenager?

FRANK OKADA: Well, I think he came over here when he was very young, and then went back and got married and came back with my mother.

BARBARA JOHNS: Was that an arranged marriage in the traditional fashion?

FRANK OKADA: Sort of. They had a relationship with another family named Otas. If he didn't have a son—right?—you wouldn't carry the family name or something like that. No, if you had daughter, and there was no way to sustain the family name, that you would take somebody in the family. . . . You would bring in male, you would arrange a marriage with a male, and he would take the family name.

BARBARA JOHNS: So it's not adopting a son, it's really arranging a marriage with the understanding that the male takes the woman's names. . . .

FRANK OKADA: The family name. Yeah, it's not unusual. Okada's a fairly common name. It's like Smith or Jones. So that's the way that came about.

BARBARA JOHNS: And your father returned about what age, or what year?

FRANK OKADA: He was still probably very young. He simply went back and got married and came back. And he continued to stay here till he passed away in '82. He was about 86 or 87 at that time.

BARBARA JOHNS: And John then was the oldest child?

FRANK OKADA: No. There's four blood brothers and there's two sisters. But we had an older brother, who was a foster brother. He was a friend of. . . . His father and my father had worked the railroad. And his father went back [to Japan—Ed.] and so my father became his guardian, essentially. So he's sort of like the oldest brother. I remember him very vaguely because he was killed the second day before the war ended in Europe.

BARBARA JOHNS: He was fighting in Europe.

FRANK OKADA: With the 442 [regiment—Ed.]. And then I had another brother—who's still living—his name is Robert, or. . . . People call him Charlie or Charlie-horse, because evidently when he was young he got a charley-horse. So some people called him Charlie, or some people called him Horse. Some people called him Yosh, which is short for Yoshitaka. And some people call him Robert, and some people call him Bob, and so. . . . But I think most, he responds to Horse mostly.

FRANK OKADA: His wife calls him Horse. So I figure, you know. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: That's as intimate as any. [laughing]

FRANK OKADA: He was at a generation where nicknames were fairly prevalent, like in the thirties, the late thirties.

BARBARA JOHNS: Now this is a blood brother, not a foster brother.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, this is a blood brother. The oldest one was a foster brother.

BARBARA JOHNS: And did the foster brother adopt the name Okada?

FRANK OKADA: No, he kept his. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: His family name, which was what?

FRANK OKADA: Eiichi. . . . I forgot his last name. I used to see him a lot. . . . During the war he used to come. . . . H-i-t-a, I think was the name, but. . . . [later corrected to Eiichi Fred Haita—Ed.]

FRANK OKADA: My family's gonna really get. . . . [chuckles]

BARBARA JOHNS: [chuckles] You can correct it later if you want to. That's okay. You were quite young when he died.

FRANK OKADA: My brother Charlie always wanted to be a commercial artist or a—what do you call them?—graphic designer. In the forties, you'd just say commercial artist or fine artist, but now it's like they're graphic designers. And so that's what he's been doing all his life. He went to Burnley [School of Art, Seattle], and has been working agencies, and he's been free-lancing. But he's retired now; he's 71 or 72.

BARBARA JOHNS: What agencies did he work for here? He's in Seattle, I take it.

FRANK OKADA: When he first started, I guess he used to work with Harry Bonath. He was in his agency. I think at one time a lot of agencies were local, and over the years it's just gotten bigger and are big kind of corporate kind of situations.

BARBARA JOHNS: And Burnley was really the center of a lot of that sort of graphic design and illustration.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, where people were taught. And so he worked for Harry Bonath, and then he's worked various offices, and he's freelanced quite a bit. So when I grew up, there was this sort of kind of working with the hands thing that was there. When I grew up, you know, funny books were really spectacular, so everybody would draw. Everybody would try to draw. I wasn't very good at it [chuckles], but I remember prior to the Second World War, all the kids would be drawing their own funny book scripts.

BARBARA JOHNS: Oh, I remember in the forties the back page of the comic books often advertised: "Can you draw?" "Learn to draw," "Find your talent."

FRANK OKADA: And so they would kind of block off like the funny book section, and create stories and things, whatever. I don't even remember any of them. But I knew that that was a real activity. As you go through grade school, you sort of doodle and sketch, sort of half listening to your teacher.

BARBARA JOHNS: Robert—Robert/Charlie—is the oldest brother, isn't he, and then John.

FRANK OKADA: And then John is the second. He's a writer. And then my brother Roy. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: Pardon me, but John worked also as a graphic designer, did he not?

FRANK OKADA: No, when he left Seattle after he got married, he went to work—I believe it was one of the missile projects for Chrysler Corporation when they were in the missile business. And he was doing editing—copy editing. From Detroit he moved to Los Angeles where he worked for Hughes as a copyeditor \_\_\_\_\_ for whatever publications—if they were in-house or whatever.

BARBARA JOHNS: Now we're talking about the 1940s?

FRANK OKADA: No, we're talking after the war. In the early fifties he moved to Detroit, and then probably in the latter fifties or probably around 1960, or '59, he moved to Los Angeles and stayed there till he passed away.

BARBARA JOHNS: And he died in 1970?

FRANK OKADA: '70 or '71, somewhere in there. The next brother is my brother Roy, who's been an engineer at Boeings. He just retired a couple of years ago.

BARBARA JOHNS: And how much younger is he than John?

FRANK OKADA: Oh, I don't know.

BARBARA JOHNS: More or less.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, three or four years, somewhere in there. And then there's me. I come in, being the youngest son. And then my sister Arlene [Yamada—FO]. She was a schoolteacher. And then when she had a family, she subbed, but now she's working for the Forestry Service, I think, or something.

BARBARA JOHNS: In Seattle?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, out of Seattle? And then there's Connie [Okada—FO], who's the librarian at the University [of Washington—Ed.].

BARBARA JOHNS: And where did the sisters fit in among your brothers?

FRANK OKADA: They're younger than I am.

BARBARA JOHNS: Both of them are.

FRANK OKADA: Connie's the youngest. And Arlene follows me. I do remember the first art we saw or was explained to us was the Mexican realists. Social realists were very popular in the thirties, '38, '39, and that was about the time of the WPA, so I remember seeing, or it being explained to me.

BARBARA JOHNS: You must have been seven or eight years old then?

FRANK OKADA: '38, '39, I guess, the WPA was still big. Because I think they were easy because you could tell stories. They're so literal.

BARBARA JOHNS: You saw them in reproduction, perhaps some magazine article?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, in slides or in lantern slides or whatever.

BARBARA JOHNS: There were several artists from Seattle—Kenneth Callahan, Ambrose Patterson—who went to Mexico because of their interest in the muralists. Did that help create a more lively presence in this community?

FRANK OKADA: I was so young, but I remember going to some theater on Rainier Beach. It was one of those theater groups sponsored by WPA. In those post-Depression years, prior to the Second World War, everything was seen in its very socialized terms, and so I think it pervaded public school-teaching. I guess the orientation of what you wanted to do was fairly realistic. You know, apples, buildings. Today it's more about—I think it's about being more subjectively creative.

BARBARA JOHNS: Maybe, but when I think about how old you really were, it would seem only natural for someone in grade school to be interested and to understand what is realistic or naturalistic. It'd be hard to think in abstraction when you're that age.

FRANK OKADA: Well, I think it was before the concept of being creative for creativeness' sake.

BARBARA JOHNS: I see what you're saying.

FRANK OKADA: Where, why you should color, express yourself. And that didn't exist then.

BARBARA JOHNS: You must have had some good teachers if this was grade school and you were learning about Mexican muralists. Or was it your family?

FRANK OKADA: Oh, well, like my brother wanting to be a commercial artist or graphic designer, had a lot of, oh, all the paraphernalias like a drafting desk and the triangles. In those days, if you wanted some kind of title made up, it was generally done by hand. It wasn't like you paste these up, or send this out to somebody else. And so, in those days, a kind of manual dexterity seemed. . . . Like, he's a very good hand letterer. He can draw three blue lines, and he can script, know exactly what the right height is in relationship to the letters. And it's something that nobody does much anymore. You know, it's too labor intensive, when you can just paste it up and get a [finished product—Ed.].

BARBARA JOHNS: Were there others among you who had this manual dexterity or interest in visual arts?

FRANK OKADA: Not offhand, I don't. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: I know something about your education and a little bit about your brother John's. Was there an emphasis on education in your family?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, because I remember the last time I went to Japan, which had to do with this show here [points to catalog: Pacific Northwest Artists and Japan, the National Museum of Art, Osaka, October 2 to November 28, 1982—Ed.]. I had a place in Osaka for three months. Took my wife down there. So they put us out in this old house. When I first went there in '59, it was really out in the country. So I went there, what, 22 years later, something like that. And there's a whole suburb. It's all been concreted. The main fire station's built kitty-corner to this place. There was a small creek that used to run, and you could get little fishes out of it. And now it's all concreted. Anyway, they put us in this room, and there's this hanging [painting—Ed.], must be some Meiji kind of idea, from Meiji period, or something about education, and there's this young boy with a queue that sort of suggests a scholar, and he's pushing a plow and he's reading a book. I think that's been the emphasis. You know, my father grew up around that. My father was very good about supporting all of us while we went to college. All of us, the whole family went to college.

BARBARA JOHNS: That in itself is pretty remarkable.

FRANK OKADA: He was very supportive.

BARBARA JOHNS: And the hotel management earned him enough income for this, or did he have other means?

FRANK OKADA: Well, I think some of us. . . . Well, like all my brothers went to school on the G.I. Bill, including myself, because I was a Korean veteran. When I went into Cranbrook [Academy of Art, Bloomfield, Michigan—Ed.], I used the G.I. Bill, but he helped me out anyway because the. . . . And he was very understanding about being an artist though, you know.

BARBARA JOHNS: Well, it struck me that for your brother, Robert, who wanted to be the graphic designer, to have had the desk and equipment that you described indicates a real commitment in the Depression.

FRANK OKADA: After we went to camp [internment during World War II—Ed.], and then we came back, '45 or '46, when I started high school, I started taking private lessons on Saturdays.

BARBARA JOHNS: I want to talk about this, but can we go back a couple questions about the childhood. Did you grow up in the International District?

FRANK OKADA: I grew up down there around Chinatown, and on the south of Chinatown.

BARBARA JOHNS: In the hotels, or did you move out to a house?

FRANK OKADA: No, that didn't occur. That was gonna come when the war came up. But at that time we would room in the hotel.

BARBARA JOHNS: So you were in grade school, you were eleven, say, when the war broke out.

FRANK OKADA: Ten, eleven, something like that.

BARBARA JOHNS: What happened to your family?

FRANK OKADA: Well, first my father was. . . . My father was part of the. . . . A lot of Japanese men started an association. Of Japanese hotel owners.

BARBARA JOHNS: Do you know what it was called?

FRANK OKADA: No, something Japanese Hotelmen. And then he was probably a member of the church, Buddhist Church, and then he probably had some kind of fraternal association with people from this community, because most of the Japanese that settled here initially came from Hiroshima area or further, Fukuoka area, the southern parts of Japan. They came from certain provinces of. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: You're saying those who immigrated to Seattle or to the Northwest generally came from. . . .

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, a lot of them came from the Hiroshima or Fukuoka. All these people from Hiroshima got together. They may even have had a club. They probably did. And so, I suppose, when the FBI said, "Well, these are organized nationals, they're Japanese, and they may be questionable, and so they picked up my father, oh, I don't know, immediately after the declaration of war, and they sent him to Montana. And so the rest of the family went to Puyallup [Washington—Ed.] first and then to Minidoka [Idaho—Ed.].

BARBARA JOHNS: Did you know where your father was at the time?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, he was in Montana, and I think all they did was sit up there and polish rocks, because I remember getting a box of these polished rocks.

BARBARA JOHNS: Was that an assignment, or was that what he did to pass time?

FRANK OKADA: Probably just something to pass time. I think the security was—they were considered maybe, because they were kind of active in the community. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: So the security was tighter in camp in Montana?

FRANK OKADA: . . . in Montana, yeah. I think they were more rigidly monitored.

BARBARA JOHNS: And these were mostly men, who were taken from their families?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. They were active, community, church, it's hometown, clubs, or whatever, I guess. And so nine months, maybe a year later, he joined us.

BARBARA JOHNS: At Minidoka.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. The camps were built like army blocks, where the barrack—it's a rectangular affair with a large messhall in the middle, and a shower/laundry complex, and then barracks. And I think we were there a couple of years, and then Brother John's role in the war.

BARBARA JOHNS: How many of you were there? John, for instance, was not, was he?

FRANK OKADA: No, my brother John went to Nebraska—Lincoln, Nebraska. He started going to school. And after the first year, he volunteered, when they were taking volunteers, and he became an interpreter. He went to Camp Savage in Minnesota, I think it was. And my brother Charlie volunteered. And so he went with 442nd, went to Europe. And then my oldest, the one that was killed, he stayed in the army, and he was transferred to the 442nd.

BARBARA JOHNS: Pardon me, but he had been in the army when the war broke out?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, he was in the army when the war broke out, and so he was transferred to this Japanese American unit. And so he was in the same outfit as my brother Charlie. But Charlie knows more about what happened.

BARBARA JOHNS: Were there Japanese American units before the war?

FRANK OKADA: No. There was one from Hawaii, which was called the Hundredth Battalion, and it became incorporated. See it was a Battalion, something called the Hundredth Battalion, in the army hierarchy, you know, like a battalion has four companies, and the four. . . . Let's see, how'd it work? Something like there was four companies in a battalion, and there was four battalions make up a regiment. So the Hundredth was smaller. It was a battalion, and it became part of the 442nd, which was a regiment.

BARBARA JOHNS: John was in school when the war broke out.

FRANK OKADA: Well, after one year at. . . . He went to Scottsbluff [meant Lincoln—FO], Nebraska. I think it was a junior college at that time. After the first year, he volunteered, because they wanted, you know, they were starting to take volunteers, so he volunteered, and ended up in the air force in the South Pacific.

BARBARA JOHNS: Now, he was an interpreter, so he spoke Japanese. You said that you don't. Did the older children in your family speak more Japanese?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. Prior to the Second World War, all the Japanese American kids had to go to school for one hour, Japanese school—hour or hour and a half.

BARBARA JOHNS: "Had to." Did the family pressure?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, everybody went. And so people like John—if they were conscientious about the study—John could write and he could speak. People of my generation, who were like nine or ten years old. . . .

[Tape 1, side B]

FRANK OKADA: So people of my generation, I think I only went to the equivalent of the first grade.

BARBARA JOHNS: In the Japanese school.

FRANK OKADA: In the Japanese school. And then the camp thing, the war started. . . . And the Japanese that was spoken around the home were addressed to kids, and the kids responded like kids. It wasn't like the adult, mature, polite language.

BARBARA JOHNS: I see.

FRANK OKADA: And so the camp thing is really. . . . So because the living situation was like an army thing, you wouldn't eat with your family; you would eat with your friends.

BARBARA JOHNS: Were you not allowed to eat with your family?

FRANK OKADA: Oh, we did. . . . But generally, at least I recall eating by myself or with my friends in camp. Some families insisted that they all eat together at all times. And so the Japanese wasn't practiced. I guess if you've learned a language at home, it's generally around a dinner table. And so we got out of speaking in Japanese, so I can speak a little Japanese, but because of my being away from the community, going to New York or going to Europe or going to Japan, or being isolated in Seattle with the artists' community rather than the Japanese American community. I've never really practiced it, or been able to hear it enough to learn new words or just by hearing learn how to speak.

BARBARA JOHNS: Aside from this child level of Japanese that you heard as a young child, was Japanese the primary language at home? Or were both Japanese and English spoken freely?

FRANK OKADA: In my family, a lot of responsibility about my being raised was put on my brothers. And so that was generally done in English; it wasn't done in Japanese. I recall when I went to Japan in '59, on a Fulbright, my cousin met me. He met me in Tokyo, when we were going down to Kyoto, where I was going to stay. And he asked what I wanted to do, and I think I said something about "Katsudo," which really means silent movies, this is 1959. And "eiga" is the Japanese for spoken sound movies, and he just cracked up. And so it occurred to me, years later, that my family had left Japan shortly after the First World War, or something, and they did see silent movies. As I recall, when I was very young, going to Nippon-Kan and seeing silent movies. You know, like '38 or '39.

BARBARA JOHNS: This is the theater in the International District.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. That used to be where Japanese would have their festivals. And they would show movies there. And I remember looking at the silent movies. I guess with war and being in camp, the Japanese language didn't change, and so when I started going to high school, I always thought this "katsudo" just meant movies, but it means silent movies. [chuckles] So you realized that maybe it's better not to say anything because if I did start a conversation in Japanese, I couldn't go into depth.

BARBARA JOHNS: And your relatives in Japan spoke enough English that you could communicate?

FRANK OKADA: When I visited my uncle, first day I don't quite understand everything, but it has to do with recognizing the voice, you know, you get used to the voice and you start picking up more. But in my situation, where I'd been out of the community so long, where I didn't hear it or have to use it, it's for all intents and purposes, really nonexistent.

BARBARA JOHNS: Was Japanese forbidden at camp? Or discouraged?

FRANK OKADA: I think the older people spoke it among themselves. And I spoke some, too, but. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: Some of the older people didn't speak English, I would think.

FRANK OKADA: They did to some extent, but most of them were more comfortable speaking Japanese.

BARBARA JOHNS: What do you remember about camp and the conditions in which you lived?

FRANK OKADA: Like I told Regina [Hackett, art critic for the Seattle Post-Intelligencer], when she called me about this article ["Pride Amid Prejudice," August 9, 1990—Ed.], I said, "I wasn't really indignant, because it seemed like a lot of fun [to me]." You know, it was like an extended summer camp, in a sense.

BARBARA JOHNS: When you're eleven and twelve.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. The indignities certainly, oh, come, or some conscious sort of thoughts, after you're matured, and you look back.



BARBARA JOHNS: When did you get angry?

FRANK OKADA: Well, I didn't get angry. But it was an indignity, and I think the older people really suffered, you know, there were great sacrifices. I think a lot of people never made it, really. Killed their will. I mean, they come back and they're. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: Of your parents' generation?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. Come back, they're almost sixty and had to start all over again. Some people just could never make it. Which is the sad part. It's more about a sadness. To have, you know, and to say that I'm indignant is like, indignant at who? In a sense, except the system. My indignity or my consciousness about that came, oh, much later.

BARBARA JOHNS: In about what time do you place that?

FRANK OKADA: I suppose, probably in the late sixties, when the idea of the importance of your cultural heritage and a cultural identity was important, with the Chicanos, and with the Blacks, and with Asian American movements. And I suppose my interest came because of the. . . . The Asian American thing, I think artistically was a literary movement initially. People like Frank Chin or Lawson Inada. They're the people who had my brother's book republished [combined Asian American Resources Project, Inc., Seattle and San Francisco, 1976]. And being an abstract. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: You're talking about an ethnic consciousness in the sixties.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, Asian American thing.

BARBARA JOHNS: That you identify as a literary movement.

FRANK OKADA: And so I became aware of it. . . . And the written word is so much more precise, in terms of describing things. And the way I paint [chuckles] is hard to align with that kind of thing. But you think about it a lot. . . . But I think to a great degree the kind of ambience of my painting has. . . . You know, when I think about painting, I always think about—at least in my stage, you know, because I'm going to be 59 in November, I've lived three-quarters of my life at least—my painting as a more dedicatory object than something that's says something.

BARBARA JOHNS: You say "dedicatory." Do you mean meditative or reflective?

FRANK OKADA: Dedicatory in terms of, mmm, maybe like a kind of a monument dedicated to the dead, or something like the Chinese stele with a sutra sort of carved in the back. I'd see it like that, because I sort of sensed that sort of remembrance of the past.

BARBARA JOHNS: Do you liken it to any Japanese traditions?

FRANK OKADA: No, I mean, it's just an offering.

BARBARA JOHNS: Well, one thing that comes to mind is the wrapping of trees. I've not been to Japan, but. . . .

FRANK OKADA: Well, the wrapping of trees is to protect them from freezing.

BARBARA JOHNS: I've seen pictures of ties around auspicious places that I believe goes back to Shinto.

FRANK OKADA: There's places where you can write something on a piece of paper, and then tie it onto a branch of a tree. Or something like that, as I recall.

BARBARA JOHNS: It always strikes me as such a direct, simple nondescriptive action.

FRANK OKADA: Gestures, I guess you could say. Nondescriptive gesture.

BARBARA JOHNS: Does that relate to what you're saying about your painting?

FRANK OKADA: It's sort of like it. It's the best I can do. [chuckles]

BARBARA JOHNS: Did your awareness of your painting take a new context, then, in the sixties? You went to Japan first in the late fifties, so I'm wondering when you somewhat formalized this in your own mind.

FRANK OKADA: Well, painting in Eugene [Oregon—Ed.] where there is really, when I first went down there, a no-gallery situation. You know, there's the kind of critics in a small. . . . You know, Eugene, at least to me, is a small town that's sort of skipped becoming a big city. Eugene is a small town that became a suburb.

BARBARA JOHNS: A suburb of the university [of Oregon—Ed.]?

FRANK OKADA: Well, I mean, Seattle was a small town, small port. It became a big city, and then the suburbs sort of grew out of that. And Eugene, to me, is like a small city that skipped becoming a big city and became a suburb.

BARBARA JOHNS: So it has a very residential character?

FRANK OKADA: It has a much more suburban quality. There's nothing old. There's no old buildings of any merit. They tore 'em all down, for what they had old. So somehow it's not really like Seattle. You know, Seattle has a lot of old buildings. I grew up here, and I spent most of my time in big cities up to the time I moved to Eugene. The rhythm of the place is a lot slower than Seattle. So you can't help being affected by that. . . . Studio discipline, it just becomes a very workaday thing for me, you know.

BARBARA JOHNS: It's interesting that you moved to Eugene in the late sixties, roughly the same time that ethnic identity became a political issue.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, I went down there in '69.

BARBARA JOHNS: I'm wondering from the way that you describe your paintings as dedicatory, if perhaps the move changed your painting? Did it make it more reflective? Did it make your practice of it more reflective, perhaps?

FRANK OKADA: Well, I guess it's more reflective painting, compared to what I'm doing now, if you compare it to the painting that was hanging in this show here this summer, you know, this current exhibition [an untitled painting dated 1966, in Views and Visions in the Pacific Northwest, Seattle Art Museum—Ed.]. It's not as physical. The way I paint—every day, good, bad, or indifferent—just go in the studio in the mornings, you start to feel older. Because the way I paint is very physical, you know, and it takes. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: Will you describe it?

FRANK OKADA: I do this underpainting, and I got this small stroke. . . . Last two year, the last two years, I did about five paintings that were like 80 by 156 inches.

BARBARA JOHNS: I've seen some of the big ones.

FRANK OKADA: Nordstrom, I did one for Jean and Bruce Nordstrom as a commission, and I said, "Well, I don't want to do sketches, and so I'll just do five big ones and you guys take your choice."

BARBARA JOHNS: Typically, do you work on several at once, or do you work on one at a time?

FRANK OKADA: I work about two or three at a time. Two at a time.

BARBARA JOHNS: And these five would be related? I know often your work has a closely related geometric matrix.

FRANK OKADA: Well, I'll bring the slides. There's one slide that's missing, but I did three with one idea, and then two with another. But that was a mistake. Next time I want to do the sketches. "Is this what you want? Okay, I'll give you that."

BARBARA JOHNS: How long does it take you to complete a painting of that size?

FRANK OKADA: About four months. And I would be doing some smaller things on the side, but. . . . So, like when I'm sort of covering the underpainting, put color over all the underpainting, when you start at six in the morning and [maybe, you] work till ten at night to get it finished]. Takes a while, and I have to figure out another way to do that, you know. [chuckles] But that just happens to be where I'm at at the moment. When I finish a painting, that's a kind of resolution, that I can say, "Well, it's done, and I'll go on to the next one." But I question the working that way.

BARBARA JOHNS: Is the small motion, the small stroke on the surface. . . .

FRANK OKADA: Well, it's just sort of brushing. But it's just a medium, too. You know, I think oil paint has that kind of physical volume, it keeps that stroke, but if you do it in acrylics, it just doesn't retain the nice kind of brush marks and things. But I like oil paintings, because you can bail out. You can scrape oil painting down, you can bring the color back up, where acrylics is closer to Russian roulette. If you keep covering it, the colors get deader and flatter. And I've always been comfortable with oils. I've always painted with them.

BARBARA JOHNS: There's one painting at the Seattle Art Museum that's in casein. Did you try that for a while?

FRANK OKADA: I don't remember that painting.

BARBARA JOHNS: A small black and white.

FRANK OKADA: I said, "This is a hell of a dumb way to paint," but it's the way it is. I just work into more \_\_\_\_\_, you know, so. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: A dumb way to paint is?

FRANK OKADA: This real labor-intensive way I figured out. Where the strokes had to be fairly even and consistent. When you start doing a canvas that's 80 by 156 inches, that's a big shape when you trying to keep a fairly even texture. I think of it all the time, you know.

BARBARA JOHNS: I'll bet! [laughs]

FRANK OKADA: So it's just my luck, if that's the only way at this time that I can resolve a painting, and I guess that's the price.

BARBARA JOHNS: We were talking about the post-war years and the consciousness of the sixties and moving to Eugene. Did you ever made an equation between these experiences and the direction of your work?

FRANK OKADA: No. No, I never said, "Here's my painting, and this is my statement."

BARBARA JOHNS: I didn't mean that. I think we were talking about the term "dedicatory," a certain consciousness of the sixties, and you moved to Eugene to a more isolated place. I was trying to see if there was any kind of relationship in your own mind.

FRANK OKADA: No, I felt the way I painted it would be a far stretch of the imagination to relate what I was doing to what was essentially happening in the literary discipline, in terms of being able to describe that experience. There was no way to make it fit, and, if I did, I knew it would make me real uncomfortable, because it wouldn't hold, I couldn't stand by it.

BARBARA JOHNS: I want to go way back to either the war years or right after. The ages that you were during the war—a young teenager and then a teenager right after—that's a time in which an individual really forms a lot of self-image.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, well, when I came back from camp. . . . No, one year before, my father moved us to a place called Lone, Washington, which is a hundred miles north of Spokane, and we lived there a year. This friend had a laundry, and so my dad worked there.

BARBARA JOHNS: Now this is at the end of the war?

FRANK OKADA: This is before the end of the war. You could move out of camp, but it had to be east of the Rockies [FO means Cascades—Ed.], if you had some support. My father had this friend who ran this laundry, and so my father took me and my two sisters and my mother up there for a year. We worked the laundry and I finished the seventh grade there, skipped the eighth. I had this teacher; it was very nice, because she had taught at Tule Lake [California—Ed.]. And so she knew about where we came from, and she was very nice. She was very encouraging and she had us write a lot and things, and so she was very good. You know, she'd be creative and imaginative and things. So it was very good experience for going back into exclusively white society, because we were the only Japanese family in that town.

BARBARA JOHNS: It was good experience because of the quality of education?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, and I think it helped because she had taught a year or two years at Tule Lake. And her name was Mrs. Locke, and she at least seemed to have encouraged creative writing and drawing and things like that. And so when he came back here, I started high school—Broadway (when this was still a high school). And so I went to Broadway one year and I went to Garfield for three, because they closed it [Broadway—Ed.] up after my freshman year. And so when I started high school, they started paying private lessons for me on Saturdays, so all through high school, every Saturday I'd go up and learn drawing and painting. It's sort of like, "If you don't go, you're going to have to get a job or do something."

BARBARA JOHNS: This is your father.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. So I said, "Okay, I'll go to school." It was Leon Derbyshire. He had a. . . . You know where the I.O.O.F. Temple [10th and Pine, Seattle—Ed.] is? He had a studio on the top floor, taught for years. A lot of

commercial artists would go there and study. And so I went to him every Saturday or, all through high school.

BARBARA JOHNS: Did he teach, himself, or with other teachers?

FRANK OKADA: He taught himself. He was sort of a portrait/landscape painter, but he was very good. You know, he didn't say you had to be an artist or anything like that. . . . So he started off with cubed objects with charcoal, fine charcoal. Made you draw for a year, and then introduced you to an eight-color palette, and to still lifes. And his background was. . . . Prior to the First World War, I think he was in the Seattle Art Club, for when there were no schools, they would go to house to house and teach each other something.

BARBARA JOHNS: Wasn't he British?

FRANK OKADA: No. He may have been British, but I think he was maybe born here. He was a very nice, gentle man, and so after the. . . . I think he may have got drafted or something, the First World War, but maybe the war ended or something. I know that he had gone to Paris and studied with André Lhote. And so he was orientated [sic], at least up to Cezanne. I think a lot of Americans—Canadians—had studied with him, and even as late—I met this Canadian lady, who said that she had studied with André Lhote in 1955 or '54.

BARBARA JOHNS: A number of artists from Seattle were there in the thirties.

FRANK OKADA: And so, then after that Derbyshire went to Pennsylvania Academy of Art. He liked people like Robert Brachman, at the New York Art Students League. He liked Henri and Sloan and. . . . It was sort of the way to paint before the advent of Abstract Expressionism. And so I liked that orientation, and that was sort of nice, when you think about it, because there aren't too many people who teach privately anymore.

BARBARA JOHNS: So these were really private classes?

FRANK OKADA: Well, Saturday there were like, oh, six or seven kids there.

BARBARA JOHNS: But they were, like you, in high school?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. And he had other classes during the weekdays and the evenings for older people. Portrait painting, \_\_\_\_\_. So a studio became very comfortable. To be in the studio atmosphere. One of the people that I went to school with was Robert Bonavie. You know, Robert? He's a French horn [player—Ed.]. I think he used to play French horn for Seattle Symphony. And there were a couple other people. And so I went there for four years. And he [Derbyshire—Ed.] really loved nineteenth-century academic painting. But that's all right because, you know, it was an honest kind of affection for it. He liked Bouguereau and he would talk about—you look at it, it's very sappy, sentimental—the technical thing about the underpainting. And he'd talk about Gerome and things, and when I travel and go to museums, I could look at a French academic painting and see some very admirable qualities about it. I was in Boston, and when I go to Boston I always looked at. . . . There's something—I think it's by Gerome—it's called *The Prince*. Have you seen that painting? It's a beautiful painting. It's a very ascetic kind of monk's robe coming down the steps. . . . He's surrounded by all these well-dressed courtiers. And it's beautifully orchestrated, because, you know, you just, "Gee, this guy did everything."

[Tape 2, side A]

[The recording level on most of this tape side was very low, making some of the connecting words unintelligible, so my certainty is considerably lessened—Trans.]

BARBARA JOHNS: This is an interview with Frank Okada, tape 2, side one, August 16th.

FRANK OKADA: So, I enjoy looking at it.

BARBARA JOHNS: There are a few of those kinds of paintings in Seattle—I think of the Henry [Art Gallery, University of Washington] collection and maybe some things at the Frye [Art Museum, Seattle]. Did you see any of that?

FRANK OKADA: Not at the quality of that particular painting we're talking about now.

BARBARA JOHNS: Not of Gerome. I'm thinking of Bouguereau.

FRANK OKADA: I look at anything. The guy who paints those ducks. What's his name? You know, those feathery ducks, really popular? You ever see them in the Frye?

BARBARA JOHNS: I can't think who it is, Frank.

FRANK OKADA: I think it's a German painter. I enjoy looking at them.

BARBARA JOHNS: Let me ask you about your father. It sounds as if he really encouraged you, in giving you an option.

FRANK OKADA: He supported us, yeah. My brother Charlie recommended my father to send me, because I'm always drawing. And, you know, I wasn't the greatest high school scholar.

BARBARA JOHNS: Well, your high school years were awfully disrupted.

FRANK OKADA: Well, it was very continuous, because I started as a freshman in high school here.

BARBARA JOHNS: But you don't describe a sense of dislocation, at fifteen or sixteen. I think back to post-war years, and that can't have been comfortable.

FRANK OKADA: Jackson Street, lower Jackson, when you came out, was all Black. I really like jazz. I used to hear a lot of jazz, and I still like it. I came back and I used to hang out at a Black record shop, called Lynn's Record Shop, and a really nice lady—we became very good friends—ran it, a woman named Betty Stiles. She was from New York, and so I started to listen to jazz records at a very young age, and started collecting it. And through the years I just keep collecting. I just got rid of a whole bunch of my old LP's.

BARBARA JOHNS: David [Ishii—Ed.] [laughing] told me. He was horrified that you had given them away.

FRANK OKADA: I started buying CD's and I think I made about \$300 or something like that.

BARBARA JOHNS: You developed your interest in jazz then, as a teenager, I take it?

FRANK OKADA: I would read Downbeat and Metronome, and I would read books at the library, history of jazz, go out and buy the record and listen to it. Then I used to go to another record shop, where I got involved and started listening to classical music. \_\_\_\_\_ says, "Well, listen to this." And this is in the, late '48, '49, and there was a woman named Twila Hayes, and said, "Well, listen to this one." So I'd buy John Cage or some of the French modern composers, like Martineau, and whoever. I'd take them home and listen to them, listen to Bartok. Then I'd go read about it in the library.

Derbyshire said, "You have to travel and you have to look at paintings, you have to go back east." I always sort of knew that I had to, sooner or later, travel to look at other people, and he was very good. But I really appreciate his sort of affection for academic painting. Every time I see that painting [Gerome's The Prince—Ed.], it knocks me up. Because it's beautiful. . . . It's so complex: the lighting and the reflections on the wall, and costuming and the postures of the figures, and the space between the figure, choreography. This is a very wonderful pregnant movement. People think I'm off my rockers, but I appreciate the fact that you look at it, and I think it's good.

BARBARA JOHNS: Is it too extravagant to say that in your very large paintings, you're dealing with space and light with a related kind of mastery of scale?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, could be. He certainly emphasized placement, this apple and this bowl were how far, what level.

BARBARA JOHNS: This is Derbyshire?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. So there was a lot of designing involved. When you do a still life, and the more complex it gets, you have textural differences, the texture of the apples, the texture of the drape, and stuff. And it's a fairly complex kind of program, I guess you could say. The more stuff you put in the more you have to program, you have to consider, in terms of entire events of painting. I think it's somewhere, some kind of tutorial logic that developed there, and especially his orientation in Cubism, you know, as up to Cezanne, a kind of even tension and a sort of a grid system, you could say, of Cezanne, no dead spaces kind of thing. So that little kinds of concerns were very important. But I did like the fact that he restricted us to an eight-color palette, and that's it.

BARBARA JOHNS: The primary, secondaries, black, and white?

FRANK OKADA: No, it was ivory black, and zinc white, and cadmium yellow light, yellow ochre light, cadmium red light, alizarin crimson, viridian green, and probably an umber, and that's it.

BARBARA JOHNS: And are those basics that you work with today?

FRANK OKADA: I painted with just those colors till I was thirty years old. Then in the mid-thirties I got involved in transparencies. I'd started a kind of minimalist thing, you start throwing everything out. And so at this point, I'm wondering what should I put back in?

BARBARA JOHNS: "At this point" meaning today?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, yeah, so. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: Thinking about Seattle in the late 1940s and your interest in art, what about the Seattle Art Museum? If you weren't a good high school student—or an avid high school student—you were really an avid student of other things.

FRANK OKADA: I used to go up there and look. I used to go on my own. I was encouraged to go to the place on my own, and I was encouraged to read, so I'd go to the library. So I'd go after my classes. I'd just go down to the library and take a book. If I read something about Picasso or something, you read about his participation with [Sergei—Ed.] Diaghilev in Parade, and so you'd read that, and so you read about [Erik—Ed.] Satie. So I sort of read like that.

BARBARA JOHNS: Sherman Lee was at the museum from about '48 to '52. He bought some stunning pieces for the museum during that time. Now was there \_\_\_\_ a lot of publicity in the community?

FRANK OKADA: No, I just went up there and looked around, you know.

BARBARA JOHNS: You would have seen first-class Asian art.

FRANK OKADA: I didn't know too much about it till I went to Japan and \_\_\_\_ to do some homework.

BARBARA JOHNS: You deflected my questions about coming back to Seattle in the post-war years. You said that the International District around Jackson was Black. But you described it only in terms of your comfort, because of the jazz. Surely it must have been difficult, as a teenager.

FRANK OKADA: [hesitant, thinking] No, I wasn't, it wasn't, I didn't think it was.

BARBARA JOHNS: You had told Regina [Hackett, in her article—Ed.], I noticed, that you and your brother passed yourself off as Chinese.

[The quality of the recording from here to the end is quite poor—Trans.]

FRANK OKADA: It wasn't my brother. It was a friend of mine. But the incident was my friend and I took a bus out to West Seattle, and went swimming. And so we were waiting for a bus to come take us back into Seattle. This little old lady with white hair asked us if we were Japs, and we said certainly no, and she didn't know the difference. So, you know, so as I have told Regina, probably beating up on a Chinese and Filipino, in the old "B" war movies.

BARBARA JOHNS: I'm thinking of your brother's book, in which people did pass themselves off to avoid abuse.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, they didn't know the difference.

BARBARA JOHNS: Were there a lot of Japanese Americans in your high school?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, Garfield had most of the. . . . Garfield and Franklin, I guess, some to Cleveland. Because most of them had returned to the central part of the city. Over the years, as they become more affluent, moved out to the suburbs.

BARBARA JOHNS: Where did you live when you came back?

FRANK OKADA: Oh, down in the south end.

BARBARA JOHNS: In a house at that point, or apartment building?

FRANK OKADA: No, it was a hotel.

BARBARA JOHNS: Did your father get back into management?

FRANK OKADA: He did everything. Make the beds, did the [janitor], and all that stuff. My mother helped. And then she got sick. She passed away in 1950. She died fairly early. So my father sort of raised, at least my sisters. By that time I was in high school.

BARBARA JOHNS: How much younger are your sisters than you?

FRANK OKADA: I think Arlene is maybe four years younger than I am. Connie was born in camp. She was born in '43 or '42. '43, I think. You'd have to ask her.

BARBARA JOHNS: So there must be about a twenty-year span then between the oldest and youngest?

FRANK OKADA: From my oldest brother, yeah.

BARBARA JOHNS: Was returning after the war harder on your older brothers?

FRANK OKADA: I didn't get that feeling.

BARBARA JOHNS: Did the family feel the terrible irony in one of your brothers having been killed in the war and the rest of you having been at camp?

FRANK OKADA: My family, at least in terms of brothers, we never discussed things where we would feel compelled to sit down and talk about things, in an extended searching way. You just never did that.

BARBARA JOHNS: It is a reticence of style, or is it the pain of events?

FRANK OKADA: I think it was just like everybody had their own thing to do, and. . . . They had their own circle of friends.

BARBARA JOHNS: So you don't remember any discussions among your parents, while two of your brothers were in the service, the rest of you were in camp?

FRANK OKADA: My parents probably talked about it, concerned with their safety \_\_\_\_ I would think, but. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: So they're not ones to express outrage or the sorrow that you described earlier.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, I think there's in hindsight—at least for me personally—it's in hindsight of other fairly well \_\_\_\_.

BARBARA JOHNS: In this context, let me ask you about your brother's book then [John Okada, *No-No Boy*—Ed.], that was published in 1957. In the recent edition of it, at the University of Washington Press, there are essays by Frank Chin and I've forgotten whom else.

FRANK OKADA: Was it Lawson Inada?

BARBARA JOHNS: I think so. They talk about trying to locate your family, and they allude to questions initially whether your family approved of John's book because of the view that it presented for the first time of an Asian American psyche.

FRANK OKADA: I think when the book came out that his generation, you know, were just starting to establish themselves. And I guess we couldn't picture someone who went to jail as being heroic in nature. Even though it was a matter of going to jail because of a matter of principle. I guess it was real hard to see to them, you know.

BARBARA JOHNS: But the book doesn't present his decision to go to jail so much as a matter of principle, because the character is very much in doubt about his decision.

FRANK OKADA: Because of the parents. But there was that doubt. I think it was good to do that. He must have had great respect for those people who refused to be drafted.

BARBARA JOHNS: Your brother John?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. Though he himself wanted to go.

BARBARA JOHNS: And I would think a book like that—because it's written with such clarity and passion—would come out of one's own convictions and confusions.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, so a protagonist essentially is a person who has great doubts about decisions he makes.

BARBARA JOHNS: Can we assume that John shared some of his doubts?

FRANK OKADA: I think, especially in Japanese American communities, that the real people you want to present are the people who actually went in the military. And got wounded, or got killed. . . . I don't know, I don't think we knew how to handle that.

BARBARA JOHNS: Do you remember how your family handled it or felt about it?

FRANK OKADA: When I read it, I knew that many in the community that served in the military in the U.S. forces would not be very sympathetic to it. But I think my family's very proud that he could publish a book. At least for me personally, it's a hell of a role model. I'm grateful for that.

BARBARA JOHNS: Are you more grateful in retrospect?

FRANK OKADA: Well, in retrospect too, I've been more grateful. But he went to school and did his graduate work, and he worked his way through school, and he wrote this book. He loved living in this town. He loved his friends. And, but he knew that if he spent, living in Seattle, because he enjoyed the companies of his friends. . . . He liked to go fishing and picnics and things. He enjoyed that. But he would never write that book. [FO means: John knew that if he stayed in Seattle among his friends, he would never write that book—Trans.]

BARBARA JOHNS: So he moved to Detroit, then somewhat as a matter of discipline?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, I think so. So he could isolate himself. Because when I was in Detroit, he did mention a couple of times, like how he enjoyed going fishing with his friends on the weekends and things and talked, about such a great guy, or \_\_\_\_\_. So I think he felt that if he's going to write the book to isolate himself, simply on a social level, because I think he enjoyed that camaraderie. See, I learned something from that. If you going to do something, you have to be able to isolate yourself. And see the situation objectively even in geographic terms.

BARBARA JOHNS: When did he move to Detroit?

FRANK OKADA: Gosh, '53 or '54.

BARBARA JOHNS: So the book was underway or in mind?

FRANK OKADA: He wrote probably most of it in Detroit.

BARBARA JOHNS: Did you know about the writing of the second book?

FRANK OKADA: Well, I knew he was starting to gather information, and he was going to write about the first generation, my father's generation. And then I realized that he took eighteen years off to enjoy his family. That was his choice.

BARBARA JOHNS: His children were very young then when the first book was published.

FRANK OKADA: They were probably four and five, or five and six. So even in Los Angeles, you know, he just wanted to enjoy his family. I've heard a lot of people say that. So I don't blame him. But then I realized maybe he should have wrote that book.

BARBARA JOHNS: It sounds as if he did write it, but maybe it wasn't finished yet.

FRANK OKADA: No, I think he was gathering material. Because about three years or two years before he [John—Ed.] passed away, he went to my father and asked him questions about the life, what was going on, and after the First World War, in the twenties, their experiences, but he was gathering material for the book.

BARBARA JOHNS: Hmm, it had sounded to me from accounts I read that. . . .

FRANK OKADA: No, it wasn't written.

BARBARA JOHNS: . . . Dorothy [Okada—Ed.] had done a good deal of the manuscript.

FRANK OKADA: Frank Chin wrote something about how Dorothy tried to give this [material to the Japanese American Research Project, UCLA—Ed.]. Well, this outfit was designed just to take things written in Japanese. Frank doesn't say that.

BARBARA JOHNS: No, he doesn't. That's interesting, because I've heard that story repeated a couple of times.

FRANK OKADA: At that point, it wasn't this Asian. . . . I think that's what I heard, but I don't know how true that is, either.

BARBARA JOHNS: I want to go back to the publishing of the first book, but let me follow a question. You spoke of your brother's taking these eighteen years off to be with his family. And that you wished he had written the book, or said he should have written the book. You told me when we were talking informally before, that you don't have children, and it was a choice that you had made so that you could work. Did your brother's decision have any bearing on your decision?

FRANK OKADA: No, because somewhere along the line, I knew I would not make a living off my painting. And I just figured, when you're forty, and you have an opportunity to get a job that would pay more than selling, you know. . . . So I just made it, figuring that I'd always work fulltime and paint. But I know that the emphasis about



how important art is that you couldn't be a weekend painter. It's a fulltime commitment. So you just can't wait for your sabbatical. You can't wait for the weekend. You just have to paint every day. I think it's that the level of expectations are more.

BARBARA JOHNS: Do others in your family have the respect for discipline that you've described?

FRANK OKADA: Well, in their own way, if they're engineering or whatever you do.

BARBARA JOHNS: That's impressive, because it forms a thread that goes out throughout your conversation.

FRANK OKADA: I sweat blood for every square inch of those canvases. Sometimes I work on a painting three months and I scrap it. But I think it's in part because maybe I . . . I may be mistaken and. . . . Because it's not very spontaneous painting. You know, it's fairly rigid, and not like it used to be. [small chuckle]

BARBARA JOHNS: You mean that it used to be spontaneous?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, a little more spontaneous.

BARBARA JOHNS: May I go back to John's family and your family? You've described your family as proud of his accomplishment, but nevertheless there's a sense that what he published in '57 would be very uncomfortable to the Japanese American community in general.

FRANK OKADA: Well, I can't see them really accepting the protagonist as being representative of the community at that time.

BARBARA JOHNS: You can see them accepting? Or rejecting? [had trouble hearing FO—BJ]

FRANK OKADA: Not.

BARBARA JOHNS: Not accepting.

FRANK OKADA: Being a stereotype person.

BARBARA JOHNS: Was there any ambivalence on the part of the family, or awkwardness, perhaps, wondering what the reception would be?

FRANK OKADA: No. I don't think they even thought about it.

BARBARA JOHNS: The reason I ask is there's some hint in the introduction to the book that that might have been the case.

FRANK OKADA: I think everybody was proud. To the community he did publish a book.

BARBARA JOHNS: It's hard to realize that he was the first Japanese American writer?

FRANK OKADA: Novelist. But then, when he was studying, I would read the books that he brought in and was studying, so there's always a lot of books around the house.

BARBARA JOHNS: This was when he was at the University of Washington or Columbia.

FRANK OKADA: At the University of Washington. So you become familiar with some of the books he was reading. Reading was a fairly . . . around a lot, maybe.

BARBARA JOHNS: There's also a reference in Frank Chin's article that Dorothy did not come to the funeral? Now was there a break in the family, or is that again not accurate information?

FRANK OKADA: No, we went down there, and we had a service. We went down to Los Angeles, and we had a service in Los Angeles in the mortuary. Okay? There was a service. We're Buddhists, and Buddhists by preference, though I don't practice it, is cremation. And so it was a matter of interring his urn in our family plot in Washelli. So anyhow it's not. . . . Well, Frank can be a little dramatic.

BARBARA JOHNS: There are innuendoes in there.

FRANK OKADA: I love Frank, and. . . . Because I think Frank was very important for the Asian American literary movement. I think he was a real catalyst, and he pisses off a lot of people, but he did it. I give him a lot of credit for this whole redress thing. I think he's very responsible. He reached the third- and fourth-generation college level, and he really addressed their intellectuality. You know, I think he's very important. And I think he was abrasive and probably upset a lot of people, but I know, I believe he did a lot.

BARBARA JOHNS: Well, maybe that explains the tenor of this essay. That is, clearly your brother's book is a real banner.

FRANK OKADA: Frank did a lot. You know, really I recognize his contribution. I like Frank.

BARBARA JOHNS: Did you know Frank and a number of the others who were coming back to Seattle in the seventies?

FRANK OKADA: I met him probably after my brother's book was published, but I'm in Eugene. There's this kind of community thing, so a lot of it is, when I come up and talk to David [Ishii—Ed.], I don't see everybody, except Shawn Wong or Alan Lau, maybe. You know, I get some articles written, so I see it fairly far removed. I grasp the situation from a distance. But I am aware of what's been going on.

BARBARA JOHNS: I wasn't questioning that. You had talked earlier about the leadership that the literary people had provided. And I wondered, I guess, how direct your connection was with it.

[Tape 2, side B]

BARBARA JOHNS: This is Frank Okada, August 16, tape two, side two. Frank, I'd like to go back to your memories of Seattle in the late forties and fifties and your connection with jazz.

FRANK OKADA: I grew up on Jackson Street. Lower Jackson, from about Fifth Avenue up to Fourteenth, it was really a lot of Black establishments: cleaners, restaurants. And so you heard a lot of it. In the jukeboxes they would have the blues and the—the popular blues. And they would have jazz records on the. . . . There were a lot of Japanese restaurants at that time, you know, that. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: This was the late forties?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, immediately after the war. So jukeboxes would have current jazz things, Western pop, Lester Young. So there was quite a bit of it.

BARBARA JOHNS: When we were taking a break, you talked about the number of musicians and who came through Seattle. [FO had talked about this subject during a recess in the interview—BJ]

FRANK OKADA: They would all be around there. I saw Sammy Davis when he was with the Will Mastin Trio. They all stayed at the Atlas Hotel, because there was a segregated, de facto, situation in terms of accommodations.

BARBARA JOHNS: And the Atlas Hotel is in the International District. . . .

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. I would see Sammy Davis. He was really a spectacular musician, because I remember I walked in the—it must have been about '48 when some of the first big Dizzy Gillespie big band recordings were coming out in 78 [rpm—Ed.]. He had one of these sweet potatoes [ocarina?—Ed.], and he was playing along with Gillespie's soloist, big band, really amazing kind of performance. And this record shop was called Lynn's Record Shop, which was. . . . I think there's a Vietnamese grocery right now, right off from Seventh and Jackson. They would get all the records. You wouldn't get them at Sherman and Clay [music store—Ed.], uptown. They would have all these Savoy and Dial recordings. . . . So it was a different. . . . I mean this was stuff maybe they played once a week at midnight on a jazz program on the radio, but I got in the habit of dropping by every day and hanging out there, and I learned a lot.

BARBARA JOHNS: And what kind of clubs did the performers play?

FRANK OKADA: Well, there a couple. Down around there they would have local musicians play. The Tuxedo [Club—Ed.] was a bottle club. Because this was before cocktail lounges and things came in. So you'd go in and you'd pay a cover, and then you'd bring your own bottle, and they'd give you a setup or whatever.

BARBARA JOHNS: You talked earlier about a number of people you saw come through the club.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, well, that's when I would see Ray Charles. Quincy had said he was a genius, and I went down and, you know, it. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: You have to back up a bit. So you were in high school with Quincy Jones?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, he told me that, "There's this great genius," but I don't really read music or anything; I just listen. But he [Quincy Jones—Ed.] was talking about his ear [Ray Charles'—Ed.] and how to compose and not necessarily his singing style.

BARBARA JOHNS: Was Quincy a good enough friend in high school that you and he went to a lot of these

performances together?

FRANK OKADA: No, no, because Quincy was working all the time. He was working every weekend. Weeknights he was playing with a group, Bumps Blackwell, and he was like fourteen, fifteen, and he'd work till four o'clock in the morning and go to school. Another good role model for discipline. That sort of suggests that good jazz musicians are very disciplined musicians in a way.

BARBARA JOHNS: When we talked a few minutes, you described going to the clubs, where the Black audience's response to the performance showed you a different way of responding.

FRANK OKADA: Because I don't read music, I only listen to it, you know, but just years of listening, I sort of roughly know who's better [than—Ed.] someone just playing a whole bunch of old licks and running cliches, that's about it.

BARBARA JOHNS: Seattle was on a national circuit then for a lot of these musicians.

FRANK OKADA: Well, they had the vaudeville at the Palomar Theater, and so they'd come up with a big band, and you'd see maybe Count Basie, and then you'd have a dance act and a comedian and a juggler, or something, like an hour program, hour and a half program. Those are the last of the vaudeville circuits.

BARBARA JOHNS: The vaudeville's different from the Tuxedo Club and others you've described?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, that was after hours. But they were in the town.

BARBARA JOHNS: And there were no restrictions on you as a young teenager, I gather.

FRANK OKADA: No, no. It was fairly loose down there. Black musicians used to be down there off of Maynard and Jackson. This is the Rainier Power Building. It's a white two-story terra-cotta-faced building. The Black Elks used to be on the second floor. And that was also the Black musicians' local union. So it seemed to be quite a bit of activity going on there.

BARBARA JOHNS: I like the way you described how you learned a lot from Black musicians and the Black community. It sounds like you spent a lot of time—and serious time.

FRANK OKADA: Listening and they'd say, "Well, this is really great," and listen. But I was very fortunate because. . . . And then around '48 and '49, I became very close to John Erling, became very good friends over the years.

BARBARA JOHNS: John Erling?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, he used to run the Fifth Avenue Record Shop [for a long time the biggest and most comprehensive in Seattle—Ed.]. I'd go in there and I'd buy records, and I did till he sold the business. But I still see him occasionally. He's very knowledgeable and he says, "Well, you gotta hear this," so I'd listen.

BARBARA JOHNS: You went to New York and a lot of other places because of art, but certainly the music must have been a motive also?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. When I lived in New York—for about a year and a half there—I lived Fifth Street, between Second and the Bowery. I was only a half block from the old Five Spot [Cafe—Ed.], so I would just go in. On the weekdays, it was very empty. You just walked in to have a drink. At that time, [Thelonius—Ed.] Monk was playing a lot at the old Five Spot, so I'd see him a lot there. And I'd see other people. Mostly, since I've been in Eugene, it's mostly recordings; no large clubs that bring in [musicians—Ed.].

BARBARA JOHNS: What connection do you make between your love of jazz and your painting?

FRANK OKADA: Not much. One of the first albums that I bought was something called Jazz at the Philharmonic, which was still on 78. They had this wonderful David Stone Martin cover. Have you ever seen it? Of a trumpet player, and it's done in beautiful line drawing. David Stone Martin, you know, has this real mastery of line drawing. It was one of the original. . . . It was the first Jazz at the Philharmonic. It was probably released on a twelve-inch 78s, and it was originally released on an Asch label. And Asch label was the one that started recording people like Leadbelly and, oh, Cafe Society groups, jazz groups, like John Kirby, not mainstream kind of thing.

BARBARA JOHNS: Okay, you're way beyond me. Go ahead. [laughs]

FRANK OKADA: I was starting to listen to that. . . . And so the cover, I said, "Well, but maybe it's. . . ." But it was a wonderful cover.

BARBARA JOHNS: What about the cover? The freedom of line?

FRANK OKADA: The linear quality. David Stone Martin did a lot of covers for Norman Granz, the record producer and concert promoter. And so over the years I've always sort of liked the kind of wonderful line drawing, and kind of line qualities that Ben Shahn gets. But very much more complicated on some of the covers I've seen.

BARBARA JOHNS: And does the line have analogies to jazz?

FRANK OKADA: No, no. It had nothing to do with that.

BARBARA JOHNS: Well, you described a more fluid line. I began to wonder if it did.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, well, this has got a wonderful variety, with the speed and the weight, and the different rhythms of line, the way it breaks, and that sort of thing.

BARBARA JOHNS: Now you say break and talk about form and variation. If I look at your paintings in series and I look at a kind of—this goes back to looking at the slides that Greg Kucera [Gallery, Seattle] has right now—I see six, eight slides of paintings that are a basic geometric shape that you've varied with color. Now, do you equate that theme and variation—if I can put it so simplistically—to jazz in any way?

FRANK OKADA: No. Not really.

BARBARA JOHNS: I realize it's pretty elementary, but I just wondered if there's anything in that.

FRANK OKADA: No, I just enjoy listening to it, I guess. I look at the painting, and I can't see where any of that is manifested.

BARBARA JOHNS: Okay, fair enough. Just had to try that, Frank.

FRANK OKADA: I like listening to it, and that's about it. Again, it'd be a stretch of the imagination to read that interest into the painting. I'd hate to even try. I think I could make a convincing rationale for that.

BARBARA JOHNS: Okay. I'm not well-enough versed in jazz either to take on further questions.

FRANK OKADA: When I'm in my studio, it's very isolated, really isolated. And I think a good jazz or good classical music is some way of bringing in real life into your isolation. It sort of keeps you honest, I think. I would look at it that way.

BARBARA JOHNS: A friend of mine who is a musician once described music as the most abstract of the arts.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, it is, because program music can create a visual picture.

BARBARA JOHNS: Right, but not that you see, and one that passes in time.

FRANK OKADA: It's really abstract in that sense. The Gates of Kiev or Night on Bald Mountain, those are very visual. I think Kandinsky wrote much of his thoughts in terms of wanting his paintings to have. . . . You know, he talks about his paintings often in terms of music, because music is the most abstract form there is. I'm not trying to find that equivalent in painting.

BARBARA JOHNS: I understand that. Okay. Are you game to go on for a while?

FRANK OKADA: I've got time.

BARBARA JOHNS: And energy? [chuckles]

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. I'm not doing anything.

BARBARA JOHNS: Okay, then I think at this point what I would do is go back to about 1950 when you started Cornish [School of Art, Seattle].

FRANK OKADA: Cornish . . . in '49, '50, I went a couple years. I went first in. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: My notes say you went to Cornish in '51, '52.

FRANK OKADA: I went to Edison [Technical School, Seattle—Ed.], the commercial art school, but. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: Broadway High School was converted to Edison, am I right that that's the same place?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, it was a vocational school at that time. So I went there maybe a couple quarters or something in commercial art, because Paul Immel used to teach there, watercolor. But, you know, commercial art I don't have. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: The manual dexterity you were talking about?

FRANK OKADA: . . . dexterity, I guess. And, but it wasn't too challenging. So the second year I went to Cornish three days a week, and then I went to Derby two days a week.

BARBARA JOHNS: Derby is Derbyshire?

FRANK OKADA: Derbyshire, yeah. And I think I did that for about a year. And at Cornish I met James Peck. James Edward Peck made his living as a commercial designer. He was the art director. And then he would teach up there. You know, I think he really loved to teach, and I think he had a Guggenheim in the forties, or something like that. Before the Second World War, and he talked about traveling around the country and on all the trains, and on the caboose, and if you wanted to watercolor, you'd get off and do watercolors. And I think he maybe had a renewal on it. But he was telling about how wonderful an experience it was. And he was a very wonderful watercolorer, and he introduced me to people like Arthur Dove and things. And he urged people to go to the concerts, go to the theater, go to the ballet, and he—again—he urged people to travel. And Derby, I think was very good too, because he says, "You have to paint on your own." He kept saying, "You set up your own studio and paint on your own." So it was. . . . I was encouraged to do things. I didn't know where the money was going to come to finance it but I was encouraged just the same.

BARBARA JOHNS: It sounds as if all these people encouraged you somewhat in the same direction. Or is it just the way you're describing it?

FRANK OKADA: They told me to get out, go to concerts, and go to ballet. So I did.

BARBARA JOHNS: Some of what you were doing already.

FRANK OKADA: You can't do everything. You couldn't afford to do everything. And so I had that. And unlike a public institution, people like Jim or like Derbyshire, they're really individuals. They don't have some myth that that was being imposed on them. And I'm glad I had that. There was this individual who didn't have to stick to some program, being forced by some administration. They would talk about other things. And Derbyshire would always talk about Mozart and how wonderful Mozart was. You get older, so you go out and buy Mozart and listen to Mozart, you know. Things like that. So it was like you didn't have to, but you became acquainted, you know. It wasn't something that I was supposed to be taught. And so it came as very personal.

BARBARA JOHNS: Your lessons with Derbyshire at that point were private lessons?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, I sat up there and painted, you know, and he'd say, "Well, the ellipse is wrong," or, "Placement's wrong," or, you know. It was repeated over and over. You'd make the same mistakes, he tells you you made the same error, and it was very interesting. The only gallery at that time, in the late forties, was in the Frederick & Nelson [department store—Ed.], was a little gift shop before you went in the restaurant. Then Zoe opened up.

BARBARA JOHNS: I was going to ask when you became aware of Zoe Dusanne, and her collection.

FRANK OKADA: She started in '50, or '49 or '50, somewhere around.

BARBARA JOHNS: I don't remember when the gallery opened. I would have said maybe '52.

FRANK OKADA: Down on Eastlake. So I used to go down when she had it at home, and she was showing, oh, a lot of younger Abstract Expressionists. In the fifties, early fifties, she showed people like Paul Jenkins, I think Sam Francis, Mike Kanimitsu. And I know [she showed—Ed.] Yayoi Kusama. You know Yayoi Kusama?

BARBARA JOHNS: No, I don't.

FRANK OKADA: She's the one that choreographed all the frolicking nudes on Wall Street at noon in the late sixties. Anyway. And so I know Yayoi had her first show there. She came in the late fifties. And I met her later in New York. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: She was a painter at that time?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, she's recently had a big show in New York. It's the one. . . . What's her name? It's not one of the major museums; it's just an art space type.

BARBARA JOHNS: Well, there's P.S. 1.

FRANK OKADA: No, not P.S. 1; it's the other one. It's the one in lower Manhattan, up around Tribeca. Is that the Museum of Contemporary Art?

BARBARA JOHNS: The New Museum.

FRANK OKADA: I think that's where she was showing her work. It may be at P.S. 1, but a sort of a retrospective. I met her through Paul.

BARBARA JOHNS: Through Paul . . . Horiuchi?

FRANK OKADA: Horiuchi, yeah. All the Japanese artists would come [to Seattle—Ed.], and they'd all say, "Well, go see Paul," or, "Go see George" [Tsutakawa—Ed.]. And so after that, I went in the army. At least in the early fifties, there were three important shows, because there were no galleries. The Puyallup Fair [Western Washington Fair—Ed.] was considered very important, because they brought an out-of-town juror.

BARBARA JOHNS: And where did those jurors usually come from?

FRANK OKADA: Well, there was one when I got first prize one year, came from Chicago Museum. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: So, from beyond the West Coast, too.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. And that's when Gervais Reed was doing it every fall. They would have this exhibition. The other one was the Annual Watercolor Show. And then the Northwest Annual. So the situation, certainly in Seattle, and a lot of other cities outside of New York, had to do with gaining visibility in these sort of one-painting [one painting per artist exhibitions—Ed.]. Now it's turned around—where you gain your visibility in a commercial gallery, and then you get anointed by the museum. It works different. It's a different system now. It was different. So there was only the three, three important shows. Then the gallery scene kind of started in '55, '56.

BARBARA JOHNS: Did you know Zoe Dusanne's collection of European paintings?

FRANK OKADA: I used to go down there and look it. I wasn't familiar with everything, but she would always talk to you and let you see things.

BARBARA JOHNS: Some of the older Japanese American artists, like George or Paul, will refer frequently to Zoe's support of them as a group.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, she showed them. She showed them and showed John Matsudaira. I was a lot younger.

BARBARA JOHNS: I know that you were younger. Did you ever feel discrimination? In other words, would that kind of special recognition have been of any meaning to you?

FRANK OKADA: Hmm. . . . Not really. Like the fact that they did show there?

BARBARA JOHNS: Well, for instance—and this goes back say twenty years earlier to the Northwest Printmaker shows—George's prints were shown and won some prizes, as did Fay Chong. That kind of recognition was a very important validation, not only for them as young men but as Asian Americans. And I'm just wondering if the kind of recognition that someone like Zoe Dusanne shows was an important signal to you. I guess the question is, did you feel any discrimination?

FRANK OKADA: No, I always felt that. . . . At that time, the jury was made not on you but on your work, so the matter of ethnicity was not the issue. The work was either good or bad. I felt that that was fair.

BARBARA JOHNS: It's for the older generation people who would be much more aware of having to enter mainstream or be accepted.

FRANK OKADA: I thought it was very natural that George and Kenjiro [Nomura—Ed.] and Paul were very active in exhibiting in the early fifties, a lot of it. I think it would suggest that it was a normal course of events for an artist.

BARBARA JOHNS: Rather than a special validation.

FRANK OKADA: In terms of ethnicity, I felt that the system, where they looked at the work first, and then at you afterwards, seemed like if the painting's good, it's. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: Fair enough.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, it's fair enough, you know. If the painting's not good enough, that's fair enough, but so I never felt. . . . As long as it was looked at that way.

BARBARA JOHNS: So you never felt exclusion in that way, and it's not an issue.

FRANK OKADA: Certainly today, where it's so high-powered and there's a lot of network going on, that maybe it isn't fair. But I also feel, if you go to a gallery, and they say, "Well, we don't want to look at the paintings. We want to look at your color slides." I get the feeling with public art and all that, I think there's a whole new profession since the sixties, late sixties. We have a bureaucracy of art administrators. [chuckles] Which is something that really didn't exist in the fifties or late forties. And it's a big industry. I think it's a new profession, this bureaucracy. You know, it's art administration. And I get a feeling that quite a few of them will not look at work, but they will look at your slides. So maybe you have to figure, "Well, the painting may be very good. The slide looks better. I think I'll send in the slide," you know.

BARBARA JOHNS: And it's a little hard for them to extrapolate from the slide to your 150-inch paintings.

FRANK OKADA: Whether the painting is good, bad, or indifferent, they're saying, "Well, the slide looks good. I'll send them the good-looking slide." It may be not the best painting. In my case, you know, where they're very large and the detail is very minute, it's a waste of money for me to take slides.

BARBARA JOHNS: Do you attribute the willingness to look at the art first, in the 1950s, to Abstract Expressionism, to the ethos of painting at that time or the formalist aesthetic?

FRANK OKADA: Well, I think prior to the late fifties, the dominance of the kind of energy in the American art. . . . It's a big industry now.

BARBARA JOHNS: I ask in part because from everything else I read, Seattle art in the late forties and fifties was quite political, in that there were a circle of artists, centered around the museum and identified by the preeminence of Tobey and Graves and artists who worked with them.

FRANK OKADA: And their friendship with Dr. [Richard—Ed.] Fuller [founder and director of the Seattle Art Museum—Ed.].

BARBARA JOHNS: And other artists will say that they were excluded. Now this doesn't have anything to do with ethnicity.

FRANK OKADA: Well, there weren't that many artists.

BARBARA JOHNS: But it's certainly very political in that one is in the inside or outside.

[Tape 3, side A]

BARBARA JOHNS: Okada, August 16, tape three, side one.

FRANK OKADA: So, we have to look at someone like Tobey, who was in Venice Biennale, was \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ . . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: Well, it's not till '58.

FRANK OKADA: . . . you know, and I think maybe that's about the time he started taking French lessons. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: With [Otto—Ed.] Seligman.

FRANK OKADA: No, I think he was going to the university or something. This guy's almost sixty years old. And so you go to Europe because you might find a more responsive audience. That's how I saw it already. I mean, you know, this guy is damn near sixty years old, and taking French because he might feel there's a more responsive audience in Europe.

BARBARA JOHNS: I see? Well, his work received a good reception [in Europe].

FRANK OKADA: I may have construed this here, because he. . . . I remember him appearing on the front of the magazine, what's. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: Well, there was a Life magazine article, in '53.

FRANK OKADA: Well, there's a French magazine that. . . . What was the name of that. . . . Trompe L'Oiel or Eye or. . . . He was on the front page of a French art magazine immediately after. So, I figured, this guy has gone to

San Francisco and participated in that discussion of Duchamp and Frank Lloyd Wright [round table discussion of modern art, led by Douglas MacAgy, 1949—Ed.] and that possibilities thing. And he still survived and disciplined himself to survive. It's like a very realistic thing—someone like Tobey and he has to make these moves. It shouldn't be like that.

BARBARA JOHNS: So it was an example to you, then. When did you meet Tobey?

FRANK OKADA: I met him once in '54. I met him about three times. I met him in '55 or something, [at] Rose's Bookstore, and I introduced myself. At the Puyallup Fair, like Graves and [Paul—Ed.] Horiuchi and Kenneth [Callahan—Ed.], they all showed down there. And I think that year I took a first prize and he said he liked my painting. I look at the painting, and I don't know, I'm so distanced when I look at it now. My sister has it.

BARBARA JOHNS: Had you introduced yourself because of your admiration for his work and his personal example?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. I guess we went and had coffee—and this was in '55 when he was still living on the Ave [University Way in University District—Ed.] up there. He asked what I was doing, and I said, "I'm going to school after my degree," and he said, "That's very good. That's great." And so then I saw him at a couple openings. And the last time I saw him, I had gone to Europe in summer of '70, to look at the Matisse centennial there. I went back to Paris. And so, by that time, 1970, he had become quite affluent. So I met him in—that's the last time I met him—I met him in a bookstore off the Palais Royale right across the street from the Louvre. Very fancy. And so I introduced myself. We talked, and we went out and had lunch, and he said, "What are you doing?" So I told him, "Teaching at University of Oregon, School of Fine Arts," and he laughed. [laughs] But his financial position was different at that time. It was very funny.

BARBARA JOHNS: Although I understand he was very anxious always about his financial security.

FRANK OKADA: So you don't blame him, at sixty years old, and not a pot to piss in so it was who's gonna take care of him? [Note: The age I surmised him to be during our first meeting at Rose's Bookstore—FO]. So it was funny. I met him in the bookstore the last time I saw him.

BARBARA JOHNS: People occasionally liken your work to his in the small strokes, and his work sometimes has a kind of tablet formation, with an irregular border. Do you liken your work to his at all? In any of those or other respects?

FRANK OKADA: I think maybe my work is a little more opaque. But because of medium. But it's larger. I suppose the dimension of scale when I work maybe becomes a factor. . . . In the paintings, it's a factor of the image, I suppose you can say. It's the physical scale that one has to consider. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: And color, I'd have to add, with your work.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, and color.

BARBARA JOHNS: I can see a lot of differences, but I wonder if you ever make any parallels?

FRANK OKADA: Well, I think a lot of that color. . . . You know, for years, in the early thirties, Tobey had mixed paint, like some earth colors—like yellow ochre, Indian red, black. . . . He had about three boxes, and they were old piano roll boxes

BARBARA JOHNS: Um hmm.

FRANK OKADA: And he must have hand mixed and tubed in the thirties. He gave them to Paul [Horiuchi—Ed.], and then Paul gave them to me. And I wasn't into Indian red at that time, because Indian red is a very pervasive color. It gets into everything.

BARBARA JOHNS: Is that that somewhat mauve, dark muddy red?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, it's an oxide. I didn't use it, because at that time I was still dealing with these eight-color palettes. I used the ochre and some things, and then I gave them to Willard Parker, for a painting. And I don't know, maybe he used them or something. But I think a lot of the choice of a palette was, like cadmiums were expensive, the cobalts expensive, earth colors. When you start mixing your own paint, and you don't use up—they certainly didn't use a lot of it. I think Morris [Graves—Ed.] may have, but. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: Now, this is a choice of palette on Tobey's part that you're referring to, or your own?

FRANK OKADA: In choice of their part, because I remember a story of a painter friend of mine named Felix Pasilis, was very prominent on Tenth Street. He said, in the late forties and early fifties, he'd see these paintings



from South America, and they're all earthy browns and umbers and ochres. And so as transportation got easier, they would go to South America, or he'd maybe to Brazil, and the place was just exploding with brilliant color. And he realized that the South American artists couldn't afford the expense of brilliant paints like your cadmium yellows. For years they thought, "Well, South were these earthy browns and these grays and these umbers, that really reflects them," but when they actually went down there and saw this explosion of color, you know, I think they realized that it was a matter of economics. These guys couldn't afford. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: So all this that's written about the Northwest, and about an aesthetic of muted color. . . .

FRANK OKADA: Well, it could be. I mean, it could maybe. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: Here's a retort.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, it's just a reality of the expense of the color. I think. I mean, you hear about these guys, you know, Graves and Tobey, living off the [land], eating off oysters or mussels, and things that.

BARBARA JOHNS: Well, surely, and a lot of Graves and Guy Anderson's paintings of the thirties are on seed bags, during the Depression.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, and things on cigar box covers and things like that, so, [it—Ed.] may be, I don't know.

BARBARA JOHNS: There's a painting in the Seattle Art Museum collection of yours, dated 1955.

FRANK OKADA: Oh. [Terrible], yeah.

BARBARA JOHNS: Do you remember? I think it's called Flux. It's not a large painting, but it to me is. . . .

FRANK OKADA: It's built up very heavily.

BARBARA JOHNS: It is, but it also to me is very Tobey-like, in that it's got a lot of white, it has those small, almost semi-circular little strokes. Were you aware of a real affinity or affiliation with Tobey? This is 1955, at the time that you describe meeting him. And I should say that the museum collection in the fifties is full of work with that kind of palette. I think that the pre-eminence Tobey must have had—did have—during that time a wide influence.

FRANK OKADA: It's very subtle color relationships, you know, grays and browns and manipulation of warms, cool, and very low-keyed hues, in a [sense], low-keyed color temperature. I guess you see a lot of it, but I, but at least for me. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: In this particular painting—excuse me—it's both the palette, but also the stroke and the shape and the gesture.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, I haven't seen that in years.

BARBARA JOHNS: I'll bring a slide tomorrow. Okay.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, well, I'm not sure I want to see it. [said with a smile—Ed.]

BARBARA JOHNS: It's a very nice painting.

FRANK OKADA: He was the modern artist. I'm in this real dichotomy, that like Tobey, who's sort of into a kind of pictorial space which is very ambiguous—like [Jackson—Ed.] Pollock, which is in a space, is it microscopic or macroscopic? And I have this background with Derby exulting about Bouguereau and Robert Henri with us, and afterwards it's great, but I wasn't making a judgment anyway. I was just saying, "Well, I'll just take it all in, and I suppose might add up someplace down the line." So, you know, I wasn't making judgments.

BARBARA JOHNS: No, but it seemed as if it was probably one of the directions as a young man you would try.

FRANK OKADA: Tobey was actually the first abstract painter, because by that time his work was fairly accessible in the museums and the galleries—as the gallery systems became more established. I never questioned that before. The polarity of that source, because I figured if I do that—it's like I just said, "Well, I'll just absorb it and let it sit."

BARBARA JOHNS: Gaylen Hansen told me recently that at one point he and Ian Baxter spent a lot of time looking at the space between the paintings in an exhibition. I guess what he meant was that in concentrating on that space between gave the possibility to open something new.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. So, you know, in his own way he broke the Cubist infrastructure, which Pollock did. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: Was his philosophical direction of interest to you?

FRANK OKADA: In the early fifties, with Suzuki going to—D.T. Suzuki—going to Columbia and publishing, it became very popular reading among us. And the artists and intelligentsia it was very influential. Because of that they misread Franz Kline. At that time, you know, color reproductions were not as prevalent, and so if you saw a Kline black and white reproduction like this [pointing to a catalog—Ed.], that it would be easy to construe it as a calligraphic gesture till you saw it built up and saw it in its actual scale. It's sort of like the guy who wrote about San Francisco. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: [Thomas—Ed.] Albright?

FRANK OKADA: Albright, about how Joan Brown and a lot of those people sort of misinterpreted [Willem—Ed.] deKooning. You know, deKooning really was about color.

BARBARA JOHNS: Through a reproduction?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. And surely in the early fifties, like you open up an art magazine and there'd only be one color reproduction, or two, if you're lucky.

BARBARA JOHNS: It's during the fifties that, well, George Tsutakawa made his first return visit to Japan, 1955, '56. At that time he and Paul [Horiuchi—Ed.] talk about extended conversations with Tobey, with James Takazaki, about Buddhism, about Zen. Were you aware of those conversations?

FRANK OKADA: No, I wasn't of their age. I wasn't of their generation. Matsudaira—John—probably. Him and Paul always were close and used to go places together. And I went up to see Takazaki, oh, maybe a couple of times, and they would look at scrolls and they seemed really sort of knowledgeable about them. So I'd just go and listen and look. And then, I was out of town a lot, and working. John and Paul could read Japanese. They could read the current art periodicals from Japan and they had a fairly sophisticated insight. You know, it wasn't all visual.

BARBARA JOHNS: Their heritage then was really earlier than the sixties political movement that you described.

FRANK OKADA: I think that the sensibility, their interest in Japanese art, was an insight that I didn't have.

BARBARA JOHNS: Um hmm.

FRANK OKADA: But I did, after I went to Japan, mainly to view Japanese art. I went to look at the Zen paintings and became familiar with people like Mu Ch'i and people like Hsia Kuei. Well, I always really sort of appreciated that kind of art, what became a spiritual exercise.

BARBARA JOHNS: It's something I would like to talk with you at greater length, maybe tomorrow when we're fresher. Because your statement in this Pacific Northwest Artists and Japan [National Museum of Art, Osaka, 1982—Ed.] is so specific about your study of Muromachi period and references that I take it that you really underwent a very intense study.

FRANK OKADA: Well, I liked the idea of the Zen painting as a kind of spiritual exercise. Above politics and above commercialism, I suppose. It always seemed like a very pure way of making art. . . . It's very admirable.

BARBARA JOHNS: I feel as if I would really like to start that tomorrow under less pressure. I would like to address to your experience in Japan. Could we go back and just retrace some of the school experiences, perhaps, up to that trip?

FRANK OKADA: Okay, so I after I got out of. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: You were in Cornish, then you were in the Army for a couple years?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, and when I was in. . . . I sent a couple paintings back to my brother, when I was painting in Korea. I was watercoloring there. And one of the watercolors—it must have been '53 or something—Northwest Watercolor, I think, Paul took first prize, I took second prize, and John had taken third prize. But I hadn't known Paul, so when I got discharged, well, "Paul said he would like to meet you," so I went up to a place called Turks on Fourteenth and James, or someplace, where he was still body and fender man [Horiuchi worked in an automotive repair shop at the time—Ed.]. And so he hauled himself out and introduced himself, and so over the years—like when he ran the antique shop on Pine and then later on off Boren—I would go out and visit him, and we'd talk. But he was a very good role model, too, especially when he started doing the direct-welded steel sculpture. And when you think about body and fender work—he's still doing body and fender work when he

started doing this—it's very physical. And then he would do that body-fender work and do this very physical sculpture, direct welding thing.

BARBARA JOHNS: I've seen one. It's fairly small, maybe two feet wide.

FRANK OKADA: But it's still very physical kind of thing, and I was amazed.

BARBARA JOHNS: Do you connect that physicality with his use of collage, which is a tearing and piecing together?

FRANK OKADA: They're direct welded. But the idea that he would do it, after pounding bodies out. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: And what were your discussions with Paul? You said you had extended discussions with him.

FRANK OKADA: Not extended; we'd just talk about other people or, you know, we talked. . . . One time, when he was on Pine, there was something called The Magician by Jack Levine. Do you remember that painting?

BARBARA JOHNS: I do know it.

FRANK OKADA: Is it in the museum collection?

BARBARA JOHNS: It is.

FRANK OKADA: And he was fixing it up. Someone put a whole through it or something. But I did like Jack Levine at that time, a lot earlier I liked Jack. Over the [years] since I've seen more current things. But you have to understand that before the advent of Abstract Expressionism, Jack Levine was a highly visible painter in all the periodicals, and as soon as Abstract Expressionism started to occur and reach its peak, Levine's. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: Somewhat like Ben Shahn, I would guess. Shahn's retained much more recognition.

FRANK OKADA: Well, Shahn. . . . I met Shahn in Japan once in the. . . . When I lived in Kyoto, I met Stanton McDonald Wright. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: It's a good place to go to meet all the American painters. [chuckles]

FRANK OKADA: . . . and I met him, oh, in about spring of '60, or something. He was very elegant. Very tall and this beautiful silver beard, black suit, black cape, one of those black Italian ones. He ended up talking about the merits of French pastry. But he was a lot of fun. The way he paints with very radiated, smooth surfaces, you know? He was thinking about it in woodblock, and something about it was going to take him 168 plates or something. I don't know what. I don't know if he ever did one. [chuckles] But he was trying to do a woodblock print or something and was bitching about that. But I was very sort of dumbstruck when I first met him, because I thought he was dead by then. Because I'd read about him in history books and who would think. . . . And so I'm sitting in Kyoto, and he's talking about the merits of French pastry. I saw him a couple times after that and he was sort of interesting.

And I also met Ben Shahn. My image of Ben Shahn was. . . . The photo that Bruce Nauman had taken of him, sitting in a studio, and it's shot from a high angle?

BARBARA JOHNS: I can't think of it offhand.

FRANK OKADA: And he's sort of sitting in his studio, sort of like this, or something. [demonstrating posture—Trans.] I always liked Ben Shahn's line drawings. And so my impression was of a very small man, as a sweet man. But he's about six-three. He's a big man.

BARBARA JOHNS: Oh really!

FRANK OKADA: He's built like a football fullback. And he's sort of bossy. His wife was very nice. And so I saw him a couple times, and we went to see this woodblock printmaker and. . . . Ben wanted to see him, so we went out. And then Ben was going to go to Russia from there, but he decided that he didn't want to go because he wanted to get back to his studio, so he never did go to Russia.

BARBARA JOHNS: Hmm. This was all '59?

FRANK OKADA: '60. I think his wife's name's Helmi, or something. And she used to do a lot of illustrating for fashion magazines and things. So I sort of respected that too. But there was something not right that he couldn't screw around Russia get back to the studio. This photo. . . . You should look at it, I think it's a Bruce Nauman photo. Not Bruce Nauman, but Newman?

BARBARA JOHNS: Arnold Newman. Maybe?

FRANK OKADA: Could be Arnold Newman. But he's fairly famous for his cluttered studio, you know, and the angle! And that was interesting. I met a lot of artists, met a lot of poets and Gary Snyder.

BARBARA JOHNS: In Kyoto?

FRANK OKADA: Oh, yeah. Gary Snyder was a . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: We haven't even talked about your going off to New York. I don't. . . .

FRANK OKADA: I just went to New York, it was about fifteen months, and then, and got to know a few people, like Ed Clark, the Black painter, and Pasilis and Resnick, Milton, and Sam Goodman, who died maybe fifteen years ago. He was from Canada and was an Abstract Expressionist from Montreal. There was Paul Resika. It was a group that used to hang out with 'em.

BARBARA JOHNS: Why don't we take a short break and talk about whether to start again tomorrow.

FRANK OKADA: Okay.

AUGUST 17, 1990  
[Tape 3, side B]

BARBARA JOHNS: This is an interview with Frank Okada, August 17, Friday, at the interviewer's home. This is the second of two sessions. Frank, before we begin with your story, I'm wanted to ask you, thinking about yesterday, whether you knew Kenjiro Nomura very well.

FRANK OKADA: I knew him very slightly, because he died in '56. I was in the army and I was going to school, so I wasn't really in town. I knew his work, but I knew him, remembering him from camp, because he lived in the same block in the relocation center. But I knew his son, George. And I did know he painted, and I was familiar with that sort of kind of painting he was doing at that time.

BARBARA JOHNS: "At the time" meaning in the fifties when he was doing abstract work?

FRANK OKADA: In the early fifties. I became familiar with his technique and his imagery.

BARBARA JOHNS: It's quite a shift from the realist work that he was doing in the thirties and mid-forties.

FRANK OKADA: I guess. I suppose, for people like George [Tsutakawa—Ed.] and Kenjiro and Paul [Horiuchi—Ed.], there was like some kind of a five- or six-year void where there were other kind of things they had to deal with rather than to, say, read art magazines or. . . . And most of the art really sort of stopped for the Second World War anyway. There were more immediate kind of personal concerns to deal with, so I suppose when they came back and had a little time to make themselves cognizant of what had occurred, or what was occurring, that it probably was a dramatic change, the normal sort of change in the way art was going.

BARBARA JOHNS: George and Paul have talked about some of the changes in their work, but since Nomura's been dead for so many years, there's really, I think, very little information or familiarity with the work.

FRANK OKADA: I'm not really familiar. I knew they were fairly realistic, in a maybe kind of expressive manner.

BARBARA JOHNS: And his abstraction I think more than the others' has references to Tobey's in the use of a white line and kind of calligraphic notation, even though it is individual as well, so that I wondered if there were an interchange of some kind.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, I think that all occurred when they came back.

BARBARA JOHNS: Maybe we can get to you more directly and ask briefly about your service in the Korean War. You were in the Army?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. I went over there I guess in December of '52, and then they signed the Armistice about seven months later, and then I just bided my time till I was ready to be discharged. I was in the Army for 22 months and 25 days, and then I came back.

BARBARA JOHNS: You were not in the front or in any action then?

FRANK OKADA: No, no. I was in an evac [evacuation—Ed.] hospital. First mostly around Pusan area, southern area, it was an evac hospital, so. . . . I worked in a dental clinic. I remember, the reason I got in. They had two

cycles where you would take basic training for like ten weeks, which was like the infantry training, then they had a heavy infantry training, which took another six more weeks or something. So at the end of the first phase of the cycle, they picked up their medics and the clerks and things, and so they looked at your M.O.S.—I forget what it stands for—and they said, “Well, you had art school training, so you go to the medics.” I said, “Okay.” So I never realized what that was about. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: Thinking you had the manual dexterity, was that the rationale? [laughs]

FRANK OKADA: I have no idea, I have no idea. But anyway, a company commander, a personnel person, said, “Well, you’re going to medics ‘cause your background says you’ll be suitable to serve in the Medics,” which was fine with me. [chuckles]

BARBARA JOHNS: And you were discharged then after nearly two years?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah.

BARBARA JOHNS: And went to Cranbrook [Academy of Art—Ed.]?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. It was dramatically different from most art schools, in terms of its beautiful grounds and the [George—Ed.] Booth estate. Most art schools look fairly dirty and like second-hand space, and this was very well manicured and in the dorms you had your individual rooms and you had maid service.

BARBARA JOHNS: How much of the campus is designed by [Eliel—Ed.] Saarinen or other prominent architects?

FRANK OKADA: Oh, most of it was designed by Saarinen and [Carl—Ed.] Milles, and, you know, there’s the Kingswood girls’ school on this estate, and there’s the Cranbrook boy’s school, and there’s a science institute. It was just a large estate with all these kind of educational appendages.

BARBARA JOHNS: Were the science institute and the art institute and the other schools founded approximately the same time, as a part of the same concept?

FRANK OKADA: I would think.

BARBARA JOHNS: Was there a progressive philosophy, or a concept of integration of these various arts and kinds of knowledge, that was a ruling idea of the school?

FRANK OKADA: No, I think, like most art schools, the dialogue among the students is what’s currently being discussed. Like in the mid-fifties it was all Abstract Expressionism, at least in painting and certainly in sculpture in the early fifties—[Jacques—Ed.] Lipchitz and [Henry—Ed.] Moore and people like Ibram Lassaw, and direct welding. A lot of people were working in direct welding sculpture.

BARBARA JOHNS: Did you take any sculpture classes or any classes outside painting?

FRANK OKADA: All the painters had to take one sculpture introduction, so you’re familiar with the medium, and it was mostly knowing what armature was and working with a model and doing it with plasticene and making casts so you understand the process, so, yeah, but it was something you had to take.

BARBARA JOHNS: But you went there to be a painter?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah.

BARBARA JOHNS: And Fred Mitchell was the person perhaps most important to you?

FRANK OKADA: At that point, yeah, because he was very active [with] the veterans coming back from Europe. Like he’s probably the same generation as Ellsworth Kelly and Jasper Johns and that group. His studio was in the same building off of Coenti Slip, where Rauschenberg and Johns first had their studios, so he took me into Johns’ studio.

BARBARA JOHNS: So this is when you would go back and forth to New York with Mitchell?

FRANK OKADA: This is in ‘55. And later [Ovind—Ed.] Fahlström moved into that space after Johns. . . . I’ve never really met him. But Fred was there, and so it was very interesting, you know.

BARBARA JOHNS: So Fred was a real direct connection then to New York.

FRANK OKADA: He’d direct you to painters, and so I thought it was. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: How frequently were you able to go to New York then?

FRANK OKADA: Oh, we went about every other month or something.

BARBARA JOHNS: As a class, or a number of students, or any way possible?

FRANK OKADA: Well, just three or four people'd get together and then go to New York City.

BARBARA JOHNS: Was Mitchell then very much part of the Abstract Expressionist style and that attitude?

FRANK OKADA: He was part of that group. He talked in length about the Tenth Street activities, deKooning, and, oh, [Philip—Ed.] Guston, and other people.

BARBARA JOHNS: He had been second generation but part of that circle?

FRANK OKADA: I guess Mitchell was maybe in his mid-thirties at this point, so he was a generation younger, so he's of the group that was in Europe on their G.I. Bills. People like Al Held lived on it, and a whole bunch of people. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: You told me yesterday that Mitchell came to Cranbrook about the time you did?

FRANK OKADA: '54, yeah.

BARBARA JOHNS: '54. Had he taught before? Or had he been an independent painter?

FRANK OKADA: He had been an independent painter at that point.

BARBARA JOHNS: He was coming directly from New York to Cranbrook then for the first time.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. So there was a certain energy that he brought.

BARBARA JOHNS: What did you learn from him that was most important?

FRANK OKADA: I think kind of the ethic about Abstract Expressionists, I guess. In the fifties also, I think a big part of being an artist in New York was a lifestyle. There was a kind of artists' lifestyle before, say, before the kind of affluency that American artists started to appreciate after '58 or '59. It was more communal, and I think in terms of the reality of the idea of living off the paintings, prior to '58, there were more artists who weren't living off their paintings. You know what I mean?

BARBARA JOHNS: Um hmm.

FRANK OKADA: The possibility of actually. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: The commercial art world developed tremendously.

FRANK OKADA: Very fast. After '58, '59, it became very big business and very well orchestrated. But my introduction wasn't about money because, when you looked at the situation, it wasn't realistic to believe that it was going to make the rent for the rest of your life. [chuckles] And so it was more idealistic. You could talk about more idealistic things—and much more romantic. You could express romantic things, like, oh, I guess, in one of those catalogs around '57 or '58. The Museum of Modern Art used to have these Twelve Young American Artists series, and I think William Congdon said something in regards to painting [that] you're like a bullfighter, and the resolution is the moment of truth. You know, in '57 it sounded all right in the context of your expectations in terms of making a living. But after '60, when the center of the art world focused in New York City, that's stuff could turn your stomach.

BARBARA JOHNS: Well, it has a very male orientation, and a very heroic connotation.

FRANK OKADA: But it's very romantic. And so something said in the mid-fifties didn't ring true any more in the sixties, it didn't sound right.

BARBARA JOHNS: But you were there during the fifties when it did sound right.

FRANK OKADA: If you're a student, it sounds right, you know.

BARBARA JOHNS: Did somehow that have to do with the number of G.I.s who were back? It accentuates the orientation.

FRANK OKADA: That could be. They're older like Bill Ivey and those guys. They were in their late twenties or something and they're making serious commitments, getting married and having families and still wanted to be artists, so I think that had a lot to do with a kind of strength of the commitment, I suppose.

BARBARA JOHNS: And this strength of commitment that you described earlier in terms of not expecting to make a living by painting: is there a defiant side, say, to the idealism?

FRANK OKADA: Well, I think your values are sort of shaped, your values and expectations. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: I meant almost a refusal to look at the economic opportunity or economic viability of what one is doing.

FRANK OKADA: Well, I think the bottom line is that. . . . I can't speak for the other arts, but for painting I don't think everybody needs it. I don't think you have to have it. So that's fine. In 1949 or in the early fifties, they'd say, "Well, I don't like modern art because my monkey could do it better." But I think there's been [a change in attitude—Ed.], "You're really gonna be socially deficient if you don't like art."

BARBARA JOHNS: This is from the consumer, not from the artist's point of view?

FRANK OKADA: This is audience. I mean, my understanding, at least around here, regionally. I think like the more interest there is, the more production-orientated you have to become in your work.

BARBARA JOHNS: I see. So it's somewhat an advantage not to have an audience that is so receptive it seems to make demands on you to paint to its expectations?

FRANK OKADA: Especially if you start selling, I would think. It's a real temptation.

BARBARA JOHNS: And this role of independence then is one that Mitchell really instilled in you or reinforced in you?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. Well, I mean it was realistic. Certainly in the mid-fifties, you think, well, there's a lifestyle, there's a community of artists that relate to each other, sympatico. In the sixties where the more affluent ones started to move in more affluent circles, occasionally dealing with almost like a nouveau riche kind of awkwardness socially. I don't know, but I think it's not an easy transformation. It's probably still difficult. It takes generations; you have third- and fourth-generation Rockefellers still uncomfortable. It's not a negative thing I'm saying.

BARBARA JOHNS: I see.  
[Interruption in taping]

BARBARA JOHNS: Let me ask you a question. If we extend this to your painting today over the past ten, twenty years in Eugene, you've not been one to be very loyal to a single dealer. Is this attitude related to your not taking great interest in the art market?

FRANK OKADA: You have a show once every two or three years, especially how I work. I feel that if there's a painting that's not satisfactory, I feel I can toss it. Because I'm not dependent upon it. You know, it isn't that I don't like money. I feel fairly fortunate that I'm still painting. You know, in my graduating class [from Cranbrook—Ed.], there were only six painters, and one of them committed suicide two years after we left—and a very fine painter. And then another one died maybe three or four years ago of AIDS, and I never heard of the others. And so, the fact that I'm just painting, you'd have to settle for that, considering what happened to some of my contemporaries.

BARBARA JOHNS: Yes, yes. It's not easy.

FRANK OKADA: And so I can't complain. Cranbrook's instructional methodology; Cranbrook.

BARBARA JOHNS: Was Cranbrook known as a strong painting school when you went there?

FRANK OKADA: They just you threw in a studio and said, "Well, start painting and drawing." But at that time, most of the students that went were fairly well grounded—had learned their drawing and painting from the figure and still lifes.

BARBARA JOHNS: There were other students like you, then, who had had considerable art training before going there?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, yeah.

BARBARA JOHNS: And someone here recommended this school to you?

FRANK OKADA: James Peck, Jim Peck.

BARBARA JOHNS: At Cornish. I noticed that some other people from Seattle became prominent artists. Jack Lenor Larsen and Ed Rossbach both went to Cranbrook.

FRANK OKADA: I went after Jack Lenor Larsen. And I don't think I ever met Rossbach. Do you know when he went there? I don't know who he is.

BARBARA JOHNS: I was looking at the Cranbrook anniversary book that was published [Design in America: The Cranbrook Vision 1925-1950, Detroit Institute of Arts and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1983] but that covers Cranbrook only from 1925 to '50. And I noticed that he was one of the people in the book. He was at the University of Washington faculty, I think, and then went to Cranbrook—in ceramics—but I'm afraid I don't know much more. I wondered if there was any connection.

FRANK OKADA: Certainly in the fifties, getting teaching jobs was no problem. And people from Cranbrook were getting jobs without much problem.

BARBARA JOHNS: Were you an abstract painter before you went to Cranbrook?

FRANK OKADA: Sort of semi-abstract.

BARBARA JOHNS: What was the work like?

FRANK OKADA: Oh, landscapes, treating it in sort of a synthetic Cubist manner, I'd say.

BARBARA JOHNS: So it was Mitchell's influence, then, or the era of Abstract Expressionism?

FRANK OKADA: Synthetic Cubism gets very complex and you can't get very fussy, and so he talked about color, the power of color, and he talked about deKooning a lot, and so that had a big influence.

BARBARA JOHNS: And then you had the opportunity to see the work directly by going to New York as frequently as you did.

FRANK OKADA: You'd go through some of the Tenth Street galleries. That's mid-fifties; they were developing at that point.

BARBARA JOHNS: In Seattle, in 1955, as well as in Michigan, you suddenly received lots of awards, purchase prizes. It seems that about '55, your work must have really come together with enough force that you received considerable recognition.

FRANK OKADA: I started painting a lot larger. I think a painting three and a half by five feet was considered very large, say, in 1949. But you started seeing Pollocks, and you started seeing larger paintings as a norm, certainly by contemporary Americans. So there was a certain challenge about it.

BARBARA JOHNS: How large were you painting, by, say, '55?

FRANK OKADA: Oh, I don't know, six by seven feet. No, I started painting large around '56. Four by eight. I always sort of enjoyed painting large. But I used to paint a lot looser than right now.

BARBARA JOHNS: Were there artists in New York besides deKooning—and I'm not sure that you would identify him as one—to whose work you particularly responded?

FRANK OKADA: When I lived in New York, after I graduated, I think I related to [Milton—Ed.] Resnick's work. And I still do. I still appreciate Milton's work.

BARBARA JOHNS: Do you know him?

FRANK OKADA: Did know him in the fifties.

BARBARA JOHNS: Your work is likened, for instance, to the lyrical abstraction of [Mark—Ed.] Rothko, in its color and expansiveness. Now, I don't know what your work was like in the fifties. I know it in the mid-sixties.

FRANK OKADA: Well, it's probably more complex in the fifties. A lot more kind of elements, and probably a lot more intricate kinds of design considerations. But I started eliminating everything. Around the early sixties, I started tossing everything out, and so you end up in a minimal kind of color field.

BARBARA JOHNS: Could we go back to those years in New York? You got a Whitney fellowship to go to New York and work. That was right following graduation?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. I came back here [Seattle—Ed.] for around six months or nine months. Then I went back



and spent about fifteen months there, I think, and then came back, and worked for Boeings a little bit more.

BARBARA JOHNS: Were those years in New York really a time then of consolidating acquaintances in New York.

FRANK OKADA: More, it was just going through the museums and just wandering around and looking. Not always. . . . But I think, at least when you went to the old Cedar Bar—when it was on Eighth and University Place—it was a very workaday thing. This friend of mine, Felix Pasilis, who was fairly prominent in the mid-fifties, was doing figurative and still-life things. We used to go to Cedar Bar every evening and so one Saturday I. . . . Let's see, I remember saying. . . . I went by his place Saturday evening to go over to the Cedar Bar just to hang out, have a bottle of beer or something, and he says, "No, I gotta work because I didn't work yesterday. I had to do something with my daughter, and I missed a workday." But, you know, it's sort of like everybody seemed. . . . I think a lot of those artists that are older than I, they'd sort of reached adulthood during the Depression, in post-Depression, and so they had a very. . . .

[Tape 4, side A]

BARBARA JOHNS: You were saying that the older generation had a proletariat attitude.

FRANK OKADA: A concept of themselves as artists as worker. Certainly their willingness—like Abstract Artists Union—I don't think you could get artists to do that today.

BARBARA JOHNS: Well, it's an ideal, too, that the intellectuals share some of the same issues as the working class or labor. It's the leftist ideal.

FRANK OKADA: A stronger affinity with a proletarian concept of what their role was.

BARBARA JOHNS: So the Cedar Bar at this time was still a very fluid place, there were the older generation of people, but open to newcomers to New York like you.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, you'd see Franz Kline. I'd see Kline in there every night. He'd come in after work.

BARBARA JOHNS: Were they open to conversation, or did they keep to their own group?

FRANK OKADA: Well, Kline was easy to approach. I knew him a little bit. And I knew Resnick, and had visited with him a couple times in his studios. At that time, deKooning had already went out to the Hamptons, to that place that he built for himself. So I met him a couple of times through Milton, once with Pasilis. I was very young and I got to know them. I was just sort of looking.

BARBARA JOHNS: Was this the time when your work began to increase in scale?

FRANK OKADA: I think it was increased in the last year. About '56, '57, the last year in school.

BARBARA JOHNS: Are there other changes that you connect with that period in New York in your work and your thinking about it?

FRANK OKADA: I see things more clearly in hindsight, I don't know. I have to look at something and maybe a year later look at it again, or something. The way I look at paintings are not static, you know, it's like. . . . As my work changes, or has changed very slowly, I'm looking for different things, and I suppose when I go back, maybe I take more time looking at things now, or something, I don't know. But when I look at something, I'm not really there to make a judgment: this is good, bad. I just look at it.

BARBARA JOHNS: You were in New York when you received the award from Art in America [100 Young American Artists—Ed.]?

FRANK OKADA: Well, I think that was because of the Whitney. That list of names, I don't know how that came about. And while I was in New York, I put in for the Fulbright. I came back to Seattle. . . . Okay, so after I got out of school I worked for the post office, that's right. For about six or seven months, and then I went to New York. Returned from New York. I worked for Boeings, but I'd already submitted my Fulbright, and so I got the Fulbright and went to Japan for fifteen months, something like that. And was sent down to Kyoto.

BARBARA JOHNS: Pardon me, you say you were sent down. Kyoto was not your specific intention?

FRANK OKADA: Well, I sort of wanted to study, just to look at the Japanese artwork. So I lived in Kyoto for fifteen months, and before I left I read Sansom [G. B. Sansom, Japan: A Short Cultural History—Ed.]—whatever was available at that time—and I read some Chinese history. Since I didn't read or speak [Japanese—Ed.], it was a matter of just looking. My first three months there, my cousin, who was teaching forestry at the University of Kyoto, had arranged for a doctorate student in Oriental art to tutor me. So he'd come in, I'd see him maybe

twice a week, and. . . I'd see him once a week. He came in, and then he'd tell me, "Go to Nara or go to Yakushi-ji or To\_shodai-ji," and "You should look at this, and this is what it's about," and explain it. And so that's the way we did it.

BARBARA JOHNS: A splendid education!

FRANK OKADA: Later on, my friend when I was in Japan—we had gone over together—was Money Hickman, Jr. He's the curator for Japanese prints in the Boston Museum? Money just did this catalog on Jakuichi. It was a large show that's been in Boston, and I think it went to Los Angeles, too. I ran around with him a lot. We took a tour of the southern islands around New Years, the New Year's holiday, with no reservations—which is a mistake. Because New Years is a big holiday. We were sleeping in bars and in trains, [because—Ed.] we had made no reservations to get on.

BARBARA JOHNS: You and he went to Kyoto together or happened to meet?

FRANK OKADA: No, he was in Tokyo. He was there on a two-year sequence. The first year he was learning the language in a very intense way, like six days a week, eight hours a day.

BARBARA JOHNS: And this is someone you knew beforehand?

FRANK OKADA: Well, we had met going on the boat, all the Fulbright people going to Japan went together. He was in Tokyo. Money came down for a couple weeks and we went down around Kyu-shu-, and he was very good. He could read Japanese and read Chinese. We'd go and—I don't speak Japanese and I don't know the polite amenities. So he would ask like, "How do you get there?" or "How old is this?" or "What's that?" and they'd look at me and give me the answer. And then I'd say, "Gee, I don't know what they say." [chuckling]

BARBARA JOHNS: The person who was responding to your friend Hickman would look at you, because you're Japanese. . . .

FRANK OKADA: Um hmm. That's sort of strange, but anyway we had a good time.

BARBARA JOHNS: Did you study more besides this three months with your cousin's graduate student?

FRANK OKADA: No. I think he got bored with it, but it was enough for me to know where all the major temples were. I just started reading on my own.

BARBARA JOHNS: It seemed from your references in this Pacific Northwest artists catalog [Pacific Northwest Artists and Japan—Ed.] that you had made a very intent in-depth and specific study.

FRANK OKADA: It was as much as you can without reading and speaking.

BARBARA JOHNS: You said before you went to Japan you were reading about China's history as well as Japanese. Is that because of your interest in Ashikaga period?

FRANK OKADA: Well, you go to Daitoku-ji and the real revered paintings, Zen paintings, are the Chinese paintings, like Mu Ch'i and Hsia Kuei, tenth century Sung painters. They were the models for the Japanese Buddhist paintings, Zen paintings. So you sorta have to, you know.

BARBARA JOHNS: And did you go with a previously established interest in that particular period of work, the Chinese Ch'an or Zen?

FRANK OKADA: Well, I liked the spontaneity. Calligraphy is like Russian roulette. You can't erase it. And once you hit it, that's it.

BARBARA JOHNS: Do you know traditional calligraphy, or did you study in Japan?

FRANK OKADA: Well, I understand enough. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: Have you practiced it?

FRANK OKADA: No, I think I remember. But I've seen enough people. I've worked on rice paper occasionally. And you know that if that stroke isn't right, it's not right, and that's it.

BARBARA JOHNS: Were you particularly interested ahead of time in this period of Japanese art in which the Chinese Buddhist influence was so strong?

FRANK OKADA: No, I just wanted some familiarity with Oriental art in general. But if you happen to be in Japan

and happen to be Kyoto, then it's a real big center of Buddhism and so you see a lot. The rock gardens and the moss gardens, they're all there.

BARBARA JOHNS: I want to refer to your statement here [in Pacific Northwest Artists and Japan] because there are some things that I find interesting. You say, "My sensibilities of Japan have been totally visual. Observations that have allowed some degree of perception and understanding through sound, texture, color, rhythm and the touch of Japanese culture and society."

FRANK OKADA: Well, did I say that, why that's. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: I know these statements are something curators require. [laughs] Let me continue. Something else may be more specific that we can address. "The desire and attempt to achieve a level of spiritual identity and serenity through the process of their paintings left a lasting impression upon me." Now that's something that I can imagine your saying of that experience and also describing your own work.

FRANK OKADA: I guess I describe that—at least at this time—where we talked about I see my painting as a dedicatory kind of thing. Not to anything special. [To—Ed.] whatever.

BARBARA JOHNS: And this is something that you see in retrospect, obviously more clearly. But were you aware of the kind of resonance or affinity of your work to this attitude when you were in Japan?

FRANK OKADA: I think I understood the attitude, but trying to get my work there is as close as I can get it without getting involved in some kind of caricature. You see what I'm saying.

BARBARA JOHNS: Yes.

FRANK OKADA: And so at this point I could say maybe that's what I wanted. I'd like to see that sort of alignment in terms of what my work is about from years ago where I had understanding about what it could be, in that sense.

BARBARA JOHNS: Have you followed this interest in Zen painting then throughout most of your work?

FRANK OKADA: Well, I'll look at them. . . . I don't read extensively, as I used to, because I'm teaching and trying to paint.

BARBARA JOHNS: Was there a time that you read about art history, or were you reading Zen literature?

FRANK OKADA: Oh, I was reading mostly history. Political, social, and art history. It's reading a gemischt kind of thing.

BARBARA JOHNS: Yesterday you mentioned that Suzuki was an important presence in New York when you were there.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, a lot of people talked about him, and evidently he was a very popular teacher.

BARBARA JOHNS: Did you hear him lecture at all?

FRANK OKADA: No. I've never read his book. I think I took a stab at it, but I know a lot of artists that I talked to—I think in the fifties. Go through your periodicals; his thoughts are very prevalent.

BARBARA JOHNS: I connect it more with John Cage and the artists associated with him than I do with the Abstract Expressionists.

FRANK OKADA: This may be the later, the second generation, perhaps.

BARBARA JOHNS: Was there some connection then in your mind between Suzuki's presence in New York and your going to Japan? Was this part of the ambience of the late fifties altogether?

FRANK OKADA: Not growing up in Japan I knew I wasn't Japanese, and I guess, oh. . . . I met Gary Snyder at this gallery once. After we met, and I told him who I was, and he says, "Frank, I knew you were a Nissei, just the way you walk." He knew right away that I was not a genuine Japanese. But he had noticed me walking around the bookstalls and he says, "Yeah, I figured you weren't Japanese, you were probably Nissei, because of the way you walked." And it must have been a swagger or larger steps, or something. And so I knew that the physical nuances were not even there, in a sense, to be genuine. So, aside from not speaking and. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: I was thinking not so much of your own Japanese heritage but of ideas that were current in the late fifties. And of the sequence of your experiences, having been in New York at the time, because you brought

up a couple times the importance of Suzuki's presence, and then having gone to Japan. [FO later added a written addendum: During the fifties existentialism was the philosophical basis upon which many artists formulated their aesthetic postures. Concurrently an interest in Zen Buddhism occurred at the same time as well and often one could construe an alignment or perceive similar affinities in regard to individual realization or self-identity within these two philosophical mainstreams.]

FRANK OKADA: Well, also while I was in New York, I met Yoshihara Jiro. He was the spokesman or the head of this Gutai group. And the Gutai was a kind of very abstract school, and there was some hookup made with the New York abstract school, and I think Michel Tapié, the French art dealer, was very active in the fifties. They were sort of formulating some international kind of abstract group, and Yoshihara, I think, it must have been 1958 or something, brought a whole exhibition of the Gutai painters to Martha Jackson, where I met them. And so when I went to Japan I went to see him once or twice. But there was this sort of kind of network being developed at that time. Maybe it's all entrepreneurship or something—I don't know—but if I was looking at this occurring from afar, you know, maybe. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: What difference did you find in the familiarity or reception of Zen- or Japanese-influenced ideas on the East Coast and the West Coast?

FRANK OKADA: Well, I sort of avoided it. I think certainly in the fifties there was a real kind of acceptance of things Japanese, certainly in Seattle. I suppose like you got a han, or something, and just stamped it and that would have made it Japanese. But, I don't know, it didn't feel right.

BARBARA JOHNS: I wasn't thinking of your personal acceptance. I just wondered if there was a different kind of understanding, either of the aesthetics or the basic or philosophic concepts.

FRANK OKADA: I was not in to understanding in a very clear lucid way. Because the language thing, because of the reading thing, I just said, "Well, I'll just look at it." It's a visual kind of vocabulary that I'm learning here. But I just didn't try to take it any further than that, in saying like, "Why I am doing this? What's the purpose?"

BARBARA JOHNS: I ask the question because some people propose that there is a much greater receptivity here—in Seattle particularly—than in New York, and I wonder if in your experience you found that or not.

FRANK OKADA: I don't know. I never looked at it that way. You know, I think there's a kind of audience for everything, I guess.

BARBARA JOHNS: You came back to Seattle then, about 1960, '61?

FRANK OKADA: Late sixties. [probably meant early sixties—Ed.] I had a studio in Chinatown. And I started working at Boeings, and then I lost my lease, or. . . . I didn't have a lease, and I was doing it month to month, and then a guy said, "You're out," so then I realized why a lease is important. So at that time Bill [Ivey—Ed.] was on Pine Street. He had taken over Horiuchi's old antique store. Bill took that over as a studio and taught students once a week there, I guess. I heard he was looking for a studio, so I went up there and I talked to Bill and said, "Well, I'm looking for a studio too," and so he found this place in the Collins Building on Second and James across the street from the liquor store. It was a very big space, and so my dad helped me clean it up, because he had retired by then, and we threw in a hot water tank and a shower. And he [Ivey—Ed.] took a big studio space, and I took one, and I made one of the rooms into a bedroom, and cleaned it up and painted it.

BARBARA JOHNS: This is the late sixties?

FRANK OKADA: This is the early sixties, after I've come back from Japan. I worked for Boeings for about four years straight, I think. I would paint every night and weekends.

BARBARA JOHNS: This period of the early to mid-sixties is the time that you did large, somewhat gestural, abstraction with very intense color.

FRANK OKADA: There's that big one that the museum owns that's sort of cracking.

BARBARA JOHNS: There's another that some years ago was down in the Opera House that belongs to the museum. Have you seen that in recent years?

FRANK OKADA: Is that a yellow one?

BARBARA JOHNS: Oh, Frank, it's been a long time since I've seen it. I think it's called PKR [1965—Ed.].

FRANK OKADA: That may be the one. It was done '64, '65, I would think. I haven't seen that in years. . . . I was painting those things, but I was working at Boeings and, you know, the nature of an artist working at Boeings is really a service, because it's really an engineering situation. You would go to work but you would get what they

wanted you to do—a flip chart or some kind of rough kind of illustration or whatever—it’s a service to engineering. After the engineers were finished, like “This is what we want”—and you would generally get your job late in the afternoon—and so like most things, “We need it right now”. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: You mean get an assignment?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. So you would work a lot of overtime. I mean, you’d go in Saturdays, and you’d go in Sundays, and you’d work till midnight or two in the morning. It was not uncommon to put a hundred hours a week in there.

BARBARA JOHNS: How did you manage to paint around work?

FRANK OKADA: I slept four hours a day. But I was eating out and stuff. Some days I should have just stayed in the bar.

BARBARA JOHNS: You describe getting up at four or four thirty in the morning now.

FRANK OKADA: It’s really a luxury, because I give that part of the day to my painting. But I was a lot younger then.

BARBARA JOHNS: So this is a habit then that you’ve established a long time ago that worked.

FRANK OKADA: Well, I knew that if I took a full-time job that it would be like having two jobs. I always realized that that would be like two jobs, and so even now I think of teaching and painting as two jobs, two full-time jobs.

BARBARA JOHNS: Yes. You went to France on a Guggenheim in ‘66 and ‘67. And that was the end of your working for Boeing.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. And I came back and hung around Seattle and took part-time jobs.

BARBARA JOHNS: Let’s stop and talk about the Guggenheim to Paris. What did you do?

FRANK OKADA: They had this Cité des Arts, which is on the right bank of the Ille St. Louis. It’s an apartment studio structure for foreign artists, and I was able to get one of those. I started to set up, put up plastic all over the floor and ceilings, started painting. For me painting has always been difficult going to. . . . Painting in Japan was difficult, and painting in France, and painting in New York was difficult, because I always knew that it was a transitory situation, that I wasn’t going to be there forever. I still painted, but I wasn’t crazy about what happened in any of those situations.

BARBARA JOHNS: So the more productive situation for you then is a long-term one, with the steadiness and the stability of a place.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, but it takes a year to break in a studio, where you become oblivious of it.

BARBARA JOHNS: Others might say that the kind of release is productive.

FRANK OKADA: There are friends of mine who look forward to going someplace, because they have a surge of energy working. I will paint—I did paint—but I spent my time just looking at paintings.

BARBARA JOHNS: Did you travel around France at the same time?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, I traveled around France and then I went to Spain, Italy, and Germany.

BARBARA JOHNS: Are there any experiences that stand out, or any artwork that stands out?

FRANK OKADA: I was always impressed with the Monet Waterlilies at the Orangerie. I really don’t have any favorites, but there are paintings I like. I liked the early Renaissance things, like Duccio and Cimabue, the early Renaissance, the sort of the power that they had.

[Tape 4, side B]

FRANK OKADA: . . . Corots, the portraits of women he did. You know, I think they’re very powerful designing. I like small things, you know.

BARBARA JOHNS: I’m sure. I just am interested in the frequency with which you refer to others [other artists—Ed.]. You’ve gone back to France or to Europe several times since then.

FRANK OKADA: I went back once in ‘70 for about a month and a half, mainly to see the Matisse show. Then I

came back and I got married [to Frances Sharon Fling Okada; see note at end of transcript—Ed.] and bought a house and, you know, no free summers, no tours of Europe. [chuckling]

BARBARA JOHNS: When you came back from Europe, you did have a series or a number of short-term teaching positions—at Stanford, the University of Washington.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, that was a kind of a loose critique, graduate school seminar, and that's about it.

BARBARA JOHNS: So this was the first time really since you'd finished graduate school that. . . .

FRANK OKADA: That I did actually teach.

BARBARA JOHNS: Were you thinking of teaching or was it just a kind of pickup situation?

FRANK OKADA: No, not really. I wasn't going to college art associations. I had no idea what they were, in fact. I hung around Seattle for a couple of years. I had met Louie Bunce, and Louie said. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: You met Louie through the Artists' Gallery [a cooperative gallery, Seattle, 1958-59—Ed.]

FRANK OKADA: I had known him since '58, and till he passed away I used to go see him, maybe every other month. When we visited Portland, we'd go out and drink together and fool around. But I liked Louis because, you know, he really was familiar with artists of the twenties and thirties—and forties. Immediately after the Second World War, most of the books on artists were about artists of the twenties and thirties and forties, so I sort of became familiar with those people. Louie knew about those artists in his early adulthood, so we sort of enjoyed. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: In fact, he kept contact with some of them, didn't he?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah.

BARBARA JOHNS: Pollock and Smith?

FRANK OKADA: . . . and so he sort of enjoyed going to museums and looking at these paintings from the twenties and thirties and the. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: You traveled together, then?

FRANK OKADA: Oh, one time we met him in [Washington—Ed.] D.C., and we spent three or four days just walking around galleries and the museums and things. He was a good friend and we just sort of had a good time drinking and talking shop.

BARBARA JOHNS: Before you moved to Eugene, you and Bill Ivey started a school [Seattle Studio School—Ed.] for about a year?

FRANK OKADA: Well, I saw it as space, rather. And I said, "Well, why don't we try it?" We tried it, then we didn't make the rent. Rather an astute businessman said, "If you want to make money, you have to promise something."

BARBARA JOHNS: Here are two men, neither of whom says he cares anything about money, trying to run a business? [laughing]

FRANK OKADA: Then I realized that's the truth! You have to promise 'em something.

BARBARA JOHNS: What kind of students did you have?

FRANK OKADA: We didn't have anything. We had some kids, and. . . . We didn't promise 'em anything. "You'll be prepared," or "You'll be an artist." We'd just do something, we'd talk about it.

BARBARA JOHNS: So they were mostly young people—or kids, you say?

FRANK OKADA: I think we had maybe four or five students, six students, and one day I just said, "Well, Bill, this was a bad idea."

BARBARA JOHNS: Was Derbyshire any kind of example to you? You speak with great respect for the studio discipline and the kinds of the things that Derbyshire taught you.

FRANK OKADA: You need sort of the love of the studio and being comfortable in the kind of paraphernalia of the studio, the smell of the canvas, and stuff like that. It was very early to get that kind of [education—Ed.], going

into someplace without worrying about grades or report cards. I liked that. I really appreciated it because, although nineteenth-century academic painting isn't something that I get too enthused about, he taught me his insight about why he appreciated it.

BARBARA JOHNS: But you and Bill then didn't have any particular interest in emulating Derbyshire's example?

FRANK OKADA: No, but I like to think that if you threw out some apples and a bottle and a drape, I could address that easier than, say, "Wow, here's paint, and here's a piece of paper, and express yourself."

BARBARA JOHNS: So painting then has a specificity about it? Or a concreteness?

FRANK OKADA: I think it's simpler to communicate. "That's an apple, and that's a bottle," or "The bottle is behind the apple," and so, if I said, "Well, express yourself," and you try to do an abstraction or something, I don't know how to relate to it because it may be very personal, and sometimes I don't think I feel privy to those feelings.

BARBARA JOHNS: It also is undisciplined if it doesn't come from the concrete?

FRANK OKADA: It's a hard way to reach somebody. If a realistic object is there, it's a common denominator for both instructor and [student], right? But I think where you don't have that common denominator to talk off of, then you have to look at the personality.

BARBARA JOHNS: When you're considering this common denominator, you're thinking only of a teaching situation?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. At least that's the simplest way to communicate, I feel. If there's no awareness of what's current or what preceded you historically, and you do something—whatever—it may be personal. I may have to address the personality and not his artistic goal, and I'm not comfortable doing that. I have no expertise in it.

BARBARA JOHNS: You've talked about your teaching at the University of Oregon, and you've told me how you, in doing critiques, will draw on the student's canvas.

FRANK OKADA: It's the simplest way. I know a lot of people wouldn't like that.

BARBARA JOHNS: And this relates to the kind of common denominator ability, or say, mastery of certain kinds of skills and understanding?

FRANK OKADA: No, I think it has to do with design placement, if it's still life or a figure or a foreground/midground kind of consideration. The background comes up forward in front of the figure on the right and then it drops back on the left, you have to sort of explain it to them. You can't talk about, "Maybe you should soften this line," or "Change this color," or "Make this area more transparent," or "Bring up the color." For some people it's maybe just easier, it's more succinct, if I just draw it for them.

I don't know, some people, it'll offend them. It's like saying that, rather than them all being individuals they're all the same, so I can say I don't expect them to all be happy. If you give an art student some information he may not be able to use it at that point. He may use it after he gets out of school. So it's just one of those things. You just throw it out and that's all there is to it. He may never use it.

BARBARA JOHNS: Your and Bill's effort at teaching, then, was very short-lived.

FRANK OKADA: Six months, seven months, something like that. Teaching at the University of Oregon.

BARBARA JOHNS: It was Louie who told you about the job at the University of Oregon, is that right?

FRANK OKADA: Um hmm, yeah. And so I sent down a resume and slides of what I had currently and got the job.

BARBARA JOHNS: And there were a lot of changes then, as you left your home town and moved to a much smaller community?

FRANK OKADA: I had been out of Seattle a lot anyway at least in terms of the Japanese American community. I think they had other priorities, trying to get reestablished, trying to get through school.

BARBARA JOHNS: Are you saying that you felt less in common with this community at this point?

FRANK OKADA: No, no, I felt that they had other priorities, rather than to worry about cultural amenities. I think.

BARBARA JOHNS: I'm not sure about the point you're making, that this was a good time for you to leave Seattle? You were ready to do that because you'd been traveling?

FRANK OKADA: I needed the job to begin with.

BARBARA JOHNS: It was a timely change, was it?

FRANK OKADA: I guess so. You could say it was. I was lucky to get the job. Considering what a meat market it is out there. [chuckles]

BARBARA JOHNS: You have an impressive sequence of grants, fellowships, and your own academic experience. What kind of change did it bring for you then, besides the very obvious one of leaving this hometown and moving to a small community, and becoming a full-time teacher and a full-time painter? As you say, you have two jobs.

FRANK OKADA: I don't think teaching is as time-consuming as it was at Boeings, where you might put eighty, ninety hours a week and one weekend. . . . And I appreciated that. But I guess there's two different attitudes about teaching, where some teachers feel more satisfied if there's a great amount of interaction with students. Outside the academic situation, in a social [situation—Ed.]. I don't; I'm uncomfortable with that one.

BARBARA JOHNS: Where the academic and the social intermingle.

FRANK OKADA: I like to keep the two separate. Because essentially I don't enjoy it that much, the kind of constant kind of dialogue which has to be sustained continuously.

BARBARA JOHNS: Are you talking about socializing with other faculty members, or socializing with the students, or both?

FRANK OKADA: Both.

BARBARA JOHNS: Do you share much social life with other faculty members?

FRANK OKADA: Not much.

BARBARA JOHNS: Or have you always remained somewhat distanced?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, remained somewhat distanced. When I took that job, you know, I was almost forty years old, and I figure if I were to make any friends I've already made 'em by now. I felt that I had enough exposure, and I wanted to make all the judgments myself in a studio situation. When I worked with Bill [Ivey—Ed.], I worked fairly independently in the sense that Bill painted during the day and I would paint during the night. But I think after about three years, I could go look at Bill's paintings and tell what area was sort of maybe giving him a little problem. He could come into my studio in the day and look, and sort of tell what the problem was. So we really didn't see each other that much, because he'd work from the morning till around three-thirty, and then I'd get in around five and I'd work till eleven at night, and then I'd take off, you know, like seven in the morning, so I'd see him occasionally. Weekend maybe have a drink or something.

BARBARA JOHNS: Is he the painter in Seattle to whom you feel the most affinity?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, and it's a matter of friendship, and I always appreciated his sense of privacy, and certainly the way he paints. I enjoy his paintings. And I suppose painting is acquired taste.

BARBARA JOHNS: The process of making paintings is?

FRANK OKADA: Or appreciating paintings. It's acquired. In three years, looking at it every day, having it around you all the time, you know, you sort of. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: Now Louie Bunce was an important connection to Oregon for you? It sounds as if it was a friendship that you continued till the end. You're different generations, but did you share this interest in projective looking at one another's paintings?

FRANK OKADA: Not as much, no. I would see his work at openings, but we weren't in each other's studios all the time like I was with Bill so it was a different kind of interaction.

BARBARA JOHNS: Has your base of friendship remained in Seattle, then, and not Oregon?

FRANK OKADA: If you want to paint on your weekends, you don't want to cultivate too many friends. [chuckles]

BARBARA JOHNS: There aren't that many hours in a day.

FRANK OKADA: You have to reciprocate. But that's fine, because I enjoy being by myself.



BARBARA JOHNS: Has Eugene been productive for you, in that it allowed that kind of isolation?

FRANK OKADA: I think it allowed me to find out if I had that discipline.

BARBARA JOHNS: Which you do, obviously.

FRANK OKADA: I still had to work at it, you know.

BARBARA JOHNS: Besides Louie, have you developed strong friendships in Portland with other artists?

FRANK OKADA: I used to go up there more frequently when I knew Louie, but since Louie passed away, I don't go up there too much. But I do know most of them. I know most of the painters there.

BARBARA JOHNS: Carl and Hilda Morris you must know.

FRANK OKADA: Carl and Hilda and Lucinda [Parker—Ed.] and [Jay—Ed.] Backstrand, over the years. That seems to be a much closer community in terms of artists.

BARBARA JOHNS: Because it's been centered around the museum school? Of course Carl and Hilda are separate from that.

FRANK OKADA: It could be. And it's a smaller city. You see the same people at all the openings. You see the same people if the artist has a party.

BARBARA JOHNS: So it's maybe more similar to Seattle in its earlier years when the Seattle arts community was small.

FRANK OKADA: Could be. I don't know. In that way, I've always found it [Portland—Ed.] very congenial and generous. Like Sally Haley and Mike Russo, they're really generous, wonderful people. So it's nice to be around people like that who are artists, right?

BARBARA JOHNS: So your connections are stronger, I guess, than you had described earlier.

FRANK OKADA: Well, how did I describe it earlier?

BARBARA JOHNS: It sounds as if you had a base of friendship here and a somewhat separate solitary professional life in Eugene.

FRANK OKADA: They're mostly friendships, people that are out of school.

BARBARA JOHNS: You were talking about the difficulty of establishing friends after forty, but in fact you did that quite a bit, I think. [chuckles]

FRANK OKADA: Well, acquaintances. But certainly in Eugene, I don't think there's any. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: Have you had an impact on the department? Obviously you have in twenty years. What kind of effect do you think you've had on your department?

FRANK OKADA: Oh, I think if you said, "Well, guess I'm absorbed everything I'm going to, and now I'm going to take down the studio and gut it out on my own," right? You're not going to absorb any more, you can't keep absorbing.

BARBARA JOHNS: No, I said what kind of impact have you had on the department?

FRANK OKADA: I suppose over the years I would think that I, by the fact that my goals and my allegiance, [would—Ed.] probably be seen in a much more conservative, seen maybe as being too formalistic, maybe being conservative, so what the hell. That's fine, they don't have to love me. It's no big deal.

BARBARA JOHNS: Is that because of your sense of discipline? Or is it because your painting is seen as purely formalist?

FRANK OKADA: Well, you know, I use. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: There was a time during the late sixties and seventies that painting was said to be over with and here you are a painter working diligently and with great formal precision.

FRANK OKADA: Well, I know the students in the sixties and seventies who did it, I don't see any of them.

BARBARA JOHNS: Pardon?

FRANK OKADA: I mean, they all have not practiced what their degree says. I do use words like “commitment” and “gotta give your work priority” and “You have to keep yourself open as long as you can, see as much as you can.” I wouldn’t feel good about it if I didn’t practice it myself—to the best of my ability. And I suppose I could write a book and forget about it, but you’ve read my books. [chuckling]

BARBARA JOHNS: Well, some of those attitudes were certainly contrary to the sense of freedom and experimentation in the late sixties.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, well, that was their commitment and that’s fine, hang by it.

BARBARA JOHNS: How did your work change? You talk about your painting going through a minimalist phase.

FRANK OKADA: The field thing I got involved in.

BARBARA JOHNS: I have to locate this. Is this before you were going to Eugene?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. Because I was—the painting that’s in the museum show [Untitled, Seattle Art Museum, 1966—Ed.]

BARBARA JOHNS: In other words, the mid-sixties, the very intensely colored, expressive paintings.

FRANK OKADA: The very heavily plastered painting. When I got down there, I started dealing in more transparencies, and so I got involved in sort of just painting and trying to develop undercoats and underpainting and transparencies and things. I can’t say, “Well, here’s this painting, and I’m going to do another one exactly like it.” I try to do it, but it doesn’t work out that way. Something happens in the chemistry of the paint, I don’t know what it is but it [never] does work out. So I’m essentially dealing with something else.

BARBARA JOHNS: Rather than trying to repeat a painting?

FRANK OKADA: Because for some reason, “Gee, I’d like to do this one, about the same weight of paint or the same kind of underpainting coming up.” I do it and it doesn’t. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: But you work very consistently in what I think of as series.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, yeah, the general kind of large form and the symmetry of what I’m doing is. But in terms of the color or the texture, or in terms of the transparency in the large form. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: Do you mean something’s well done and you want to repeat it and it doesn’t repeat.

FRANK OKADA: And it doesn’t work out.

BARBARA JOHNS: But you do seem to work very systematically with a particular shape. I look at these slides of Greg Kucera’s [gallery—Ed.]. There’s this central square worked in variations over and over. How do you establish that particular geometry of a series? It almost looks cut out.

FRANK OKADA: I don’t know. It’s something to paint, I guess, at this point.

BARBARA JOHNS: Is it something you work with cutouts?

FRANK OKADA: No.

BARBARA JOHNS: Or is it something you work totally on the canvas?

FRANK OKADA: I just work totally on the canvas. I knew when I was doing it, the field thing in the seventies, that if you’re working in that sort of minimalist field color bag, that we’re talking about a presence—right?—of a painting. Because there’s nothing that can be sort of suggested, deep, shown on the canvas as to why the painting works. So I presume we’re talking about achieving a presence rather. And I knew when I was looking at that stuff, three years before I dropped it, I thought, “One day I’m going to do one of these things and there’s going to be nothing there.”

BARBARA JOHNS: Did you get to that point?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, but it gets boring, too. [chuckles] I show slides of these things. They say, “Well, you gotta show slides.” What if you have six white ones; they all look white, and white rectangle. Or you’ve done twelve red ones. There’s something you can’t convey in terms of slides, in a way. I knew that one day I’d look at one of those field paintings and there’d be nothing there for me.

BARBARA JOHNS: Did you see these in purely formalist terms yourself? You talk about a presence that I imagine could be simply physical or it might have other philosophical connotations.

FRANK OKADA: Well, in terms of presence, having a resolution of a painting that had maybe diversified shapes or forms.

BARBARA JOHNS: In other words, in formal terms.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, it had a sense of resolution. It's complete; there was some life in it.

BARBARA JOHNS: Do you associate any of that presence with the kind of aspirations [Mark—Ed.] Rothko spoke of, or the spiritual presence you mentioned?

FRANK OKADA: No, I don't see it. . . . I just do the painting and I don't think it belongs at a certain place. If someone buys a painting and doesn't like it and throws it on the roof when it's leaking. . . . It's his; he paid the money for it. He can do any damn thing he wants with it.

BARBARA JOHNS: After this, when the minimalist painting then got down to the point when nothing was there for you, what was next?

FRANK OKADA: I realized that I spent maybe ten or twelve years tossing everything out, and so, "Gee, you know, I know at this point I have to put [something back—Ed.]. . . ."

[Tape 5, side A]

BARBARA JOHNS: This is the third tape, or the last tape, of August 17, 1990.

Frank, you were talking about your minimalist work in the process of emptying or reducing painting down to the point that you finally reached the end, or felt there was nothing there. When were you working on the shaped canvases?

FRANK OKADA: I knew that it was coming and so I started the circular ones. They sort of overlap, my moving into a period where I tried to present large forms. Something like this [pointing to slides—Ed.].

BARBARA JOHNS: So it's a rectangular painting but the shape is with, painted within it, or is it actually a shaped canvas?

FRANK OKADA: These are circular stretchers or strainers that I had made up. I had a carpenter make up six 72-inch-diameter circular frames. I'd probably like to try that again, but considering what carpenters. . . . That's very highly specialized kind of carpentry.

BARBARA JOHNS: I know of at least one circular painting from the fifties [Untitled, 1958, Seattle Art Museum collection—Ed.].

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, I got that. . . . When I lived in New York, I used to hang out a lot in the Brata Gallery—Nicholas Krushnek? We were friends, and he and his brother ran the Brata Gallery, which is one of the cooperatives, him and his brother John Krushnek. So I'd go over there every morning, because I only lived about three blocks from Tenth Street at that time, and I'd go over there and have coffee with those guys every morning, and one time they got these circular strainers from Europe, so I bought one, and I think that's the one. [chuckles]

BARBARA JOHNS: Oh, just the one?

FRANK OKADA: Yeah. And then I did some smaller ones, sort of cut some paper out, and I don't know what happened to those.

BARBARA JOHNS: Do you see the circle as just a primary shape?

FRANK OKADA: Well, I just felt that it was something else to work on while I was dealing with these rectangular. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: Now this is the mid-seventies.

FRANK OKADA: I think I showed those in '75 or '76, somewhere in there. I just needed to confront something else at the same time. And so after the circular paintings, I slowly started to make paintings that were going toward this thing [pointing to reproductions in catalog Pacific Northwest Artists and Japan—Ed.].

BARBARA JOHNS: Now I've seen a reproduction of some with just a square, say a tilted rectangle within the

larger canvas.

FRANK OKADA: Those things started occurring at that point. I think those things date from the late seventies—or '77.

BARBARA JOHNS: The geometry in the Osaka catalog is not so complex as the geometry in the more recent slides.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, the form is more self-contained within the dimensions of the [canvas]. They're more complete.

BARBARA JOHNS: Now these were from '88, '89.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah.

BARBARA JOHNS: How do you derive that shape? Some of these are basically rectangular, but with appendages or cuts, little additions of some kind.

FRANK OKADA: I don't know. I just did it.

BARBARA JOHNS: Do you see this in terms of a central shape, or of an edge? This in the Osaka catalog can be either way.

FRANK OKADA: That's like dynamics, where it's an extension of a form from beyond the edge of the canvas, and these sort of forms are fairly centered and more symmetrical, because they're complete forms, and they're generally in a symmetrical [composition—Ed.].

BARBARA JOHNS: How long have you been working in this strong, almost pure, color? The minimalist work, I take it, was almost monochrome.

FRANK OKADA: Well, a lot of it was fairly primary. Primary reds, primary blues. The color sensibility is fairly consistent from that period.

BARBARA JOHNS: Now you talked, when we took our break, of some new geometry that might have some kind of reference to Japanese shapes. You talked about your willingness at this point in your life to reconsider something—and you were pretty abstract about it—about Japanese heritage.

FRANK OKADA: The fan shapes and things. Just out of curiosity.

BARBARA JOHNS: You should describe it more fully, because we had that conversation elsewhere, without this tape.

FRANK OKADA: Well, I felt that there was a time in the fifties where I could have done something that was more Japanese-like, but I didn't feel that I wanted people to look at my paintings through that perspective. I wanted to see it more directly, because in painting, you can always figure out, or perceive currently, what would work. Like in the sixties if you threw a dog in it, it would work, or if you threw the serrated lines in it, it would work. And I suppose in the fifties if they had a rubber stamp and a han. . . . I've always sort of avoided that because I'd have a lot of doubts. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: Now it would have worked because, you said earlier, of the interest during the fifties, in a universalism or integrated cultures.

FRANK OKADA: And a great interest in Japanese art, in all things Japanese, you know. But I think, for me, that would have dissipated the integrity of what I was trying to do. Though I was sorely tempted.

BARBARA JOHNS: It might have seemed the easy way out.

FRANK OKADA: Because you always like to make your paint bills. And so I didn't, because I didn't think I could. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: May I interject a question? That work would have been as accepted in New York as in Seattle?

FRANK OKADA: I don't know. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: Had you succumbed to the temptation, in other words, and your work had been recognizably Japanese in some way, you were saying that it would have found as good a reception in New York as in Seattle?

FRANK OKADA: I think so. There were real Japanese painters true to their background, and growing and maturing

and having their artistic training in Japan, like, oh, Kenzo Okada or one of his contemporaries used to show at the. . . . I don't know, but. . . . There were two or three, and they were very Japanese-like. Kenzo's things remind you of sort of shapes floating on Japanese screen, seventeenth or eighteenth century, very elegant, very subtle. But that was true to his nature, you know, and I knew that it was real for him to do that.

BARBARA JOHNS: So it would have compromised your sense of integrity and discipline at that point?

FRANK OKADA: Well, my feelings at that point were that, for me, would have obfuscated what I wanted the painting to do on its own.

BARBARA JOHNS: And some of that is also wanting to take your position without the ethnic identity. On a personal basis also, or was it simply a matter of the work?

FRANK OKADA: I think you can say my paintings are not really abstract in that they have maybe a. . . . Say they're a metaphor for expansive landscape?

BARBARA JOHNS: At this present point then, you are. . . .

FRANK OKADA: I'm just sort of curious. Plans to subtly incorporate Japanese themes.

BARBARA JOHNS: Would you say that you are curious about going back, trying to incorporate shapes that might have some reference to traditional Japanese forms?

FRANK OKADA: I think at this point, why not?

BARBARA JOHNS: What do you imagine using besides a fan shape?

FRANK OKADA: Two weeks down the line when I get involved with it, I might say, "I'll never be able to deal with this."

BARBARA JOHNS: It becomes too literal.

FRANK OKADA: Or too obvious or too specific or something.

BARBARA JOHNS: Now a great deal of the emato-e, or the Japanese decorative tradition, has to do with placement and color. Whether or not your geometry has that reference to a specific form, such as a fan, would you see your use of geometry and color in any relationship to that traditional Japanese emphasis on color and placement?

FRANK OKADA: I think the kind of form I'm working with, which is very symmetrical, that talking about placement may not describe what I have to deal with. The form [is in it]. So when you work with large forms like I do, large, massive forms, very symmetrical, that I don't think it's too much about placement. You take a canvas, you throw a big form in, massive form, very symmetrical, then placement may be not the right word to describe what you have to really deal with in the painting. You may be dealing with adjustment. The adjustment or the contour of the form. The contour, edges of the form.

BARBARA JOHNS: It is essentially symmetrical, but it's the asymmetry—or those adjustments—that enliven it.

FRANK OKADA: Well, no, because the adjustments are made in this mass of symmetrical form. If you have one circle on the left side of the canvas, and two smaller ones on the right side, and there's some kind of drama between those two circular forms from left to right—or higher and lower on the plane.

BARBARA JOHNS: I'm not trying to push a point so much as to see if, aside from maybe a fan shape, there are other things that you are willing to see in your work now that have affinity to Japanese traditions. Because you say more and more that you're willing to acknowledge or bring to the forefront, your cultural heritage.

FRANK OKADA: I feel that I could maybe paint a painting out of something. It doesn't have to. . . . I may do this thing and it may be so obvious I couldn't deal with it.

BARBARA JOHNS: I can't wait. I'd like to see it. [laughs]

FRANK OKADA: [chuckles] So, I may never do it, see. I have a couple things that may be sort of dealing with that. I think, if I did these paintings, and I did finish them, that they would be that to me, but I would have to point it out to others.

BARBARA JOHNS: Would you want to point it out to others?

FRANK OKADA: Not particularly.

BARBARA JOHNS: Or do other people try to make more of a Japanese character in your work than you are willing, or have been willing?

FRANK OKADA: I don't know. Because I think all the Asian American artists, really there isn't a certain aesthetic that binds them, or a theoretical posture, anything.

BARBARA JOHNS: If I understand what you've been saying in the last few minutes, you are more willing to identify yourself as an Asian American artist now than you might have been as a younger man?

FRANK OKADA: No, I didn't want my paintings to be seen through that prism. Because if you're an abstract painter, that doesn't make the painting. And I would never feel that I could get an honest response.

BARBARA JOHNS: Are there other ways in which you define yourself as Nissei? You've been a part of a close Japanese American community in Seattle.

FRANK OKADA: Growing up.

BARBARA JOHNS: You've lived apart from that now for twenty years, but retained close connections to it. Your art, as you say, you have wanted identified separately from that.

FRANK OKADA: Because the things I paint it's really hard to read those Asian American characteristics into them. It's like reading more into them than what is really there.

BARBARA JOHNS: Besides the abstract painters whom you mentioned, are you interested in others who have referred to Japanese traditions? Are you interested in other more overtly politicized works, such as Roger Shimomura's?

FRANK OKADA: Well, I don't see Roger's work as political, I guess. I think he paints metaphorically, or something. I don't see him that literally.

BARBARA JOHNS: When I used the word "political," I was thinking specifically of the Minidoka series of the mid-seventies.

FRANK OKADA: He has strong social and political consciousness. Being an abstract painter, it's real hard to bring that—at least for me—to bring that in.

BARBARA JOHNS: I was just wondering what you feel your relationship to it is, or whether you're interested in it.

FRANK OKADA: I think even Roger's moving out of that at this point. I think his more recent painting has a stronger dynamic design. So it may be moving out of that strong social/political consciousness that he's been involved, it was a very conscious part of his work at this point.

BARBARA JOHNS: You've described your work as somehow a metaphor for landscape. Do you see this more recent work, too—of the late eighties and ninety—as having that expansiveness?

FRANK OKADA: Well, I think the pure abstract painting is. . . . You look at Kandinsky, and you see Kandinsky wanting to do pure abstract paintings as abstract as music. But then when you see chronologically the development of the horse/rider motif and the rainbow, and moving into 1909 or 1910, where it gets very expressive, once you're aware of that, you know it came out of something. From very realistic sources. And so I don't know if that's really possible to do a pure abstract painting. You certainly look at a [Jackson—Ed.] Pollock, and his relationship to [Thomas Hart—Ed.] Benton in terms of Benton's sort of involvement in a kind of neo-Baroque compositions, and Pollock utilizes that very complex kind of intertwining composition, or complexities. So I don't know.

BARBARA JOHNS: And yours has both the expansiveness and intense color and geometry, but also in relationship to the texture and the interest in surface texture, a dynamic tension.

FRANK OKADA: So I don't know. You can look at any abstract painting and you could localize it. You could look at it and interpret it as not being purely abstract.

BARBARA JOHNS: As you've mentioned a few times, you look forward to retirement in five or six years, is that about right?

FRANK OKADA: If I wake up. [chuckles]

BARBARA JOHNS: You'll stay in Eugene?

FRANK OKADA: More than likely. It's isolated. . . .

BARBARA JOHNS: And your wife is at home in Eugene.

FRANK OKADA: I suppose I could come back up here, I don't know. Maybe my cat might not like it, who knows. [said with a smile—Ed.]

BARBARA JOHNS: Are there other things that you look forward to in the coming months or years?

FRANK OKADA: Mmm, no. The only thing is I'm sort of curious about taking those small ones I just showed you, maybe kind of do maybe half a dozen larger ones.

BARBARA JOHNS: These small ones are the two by four of this format [pointing to slides—Ed.]?

FRANK OKADA: This horizontal sequence. And actually, it's in ratio. The measurements is really sort of studies for something to be 68 by 156 inches.

BARBARA JOHNS: These are 17 by 39 inches.

FRANK OKADA: Yeah, so it's a sixteenth, or thirty-seconds of a. . . . Whatever. I'm not very good at math. Who knows, I might just do some more circles. [chuckles]

BARBARA JOHNS: So you'll continue the discipline of painting, I guess, and Eugene has been productive and provides the solitude you like?

FRANK OKADA: Can't complain.  
[Interruption in taping]

BARBARA JOHNS: You seem to have had a clear connection to this Japanese American community in Seattle, to family, and you made a pretty clear distinction in your mind that you didn't want your work—at least at one point in your life—identified through what you call that prism.

FRANK OKADA: Well, I think that presence, you know, this perspective of viewing it with a Japanese or Asian American, trying to perceive it that way, might suggest that the viewer read things that are not manifest in it. [It] would also destroy say the ambiguity and the generality of abstract painting—the spirit of abstract painting—to impose that perception or that prism of viewing it. And that would be dishonest to do that, because it may not be there. So I'd rather keep it open-ended, I wouldn't say you have to look at it that way, because that destroys the mystery, I suppose.

BARBARA JOHNS: Thank you very much.

[Note: At the conclusion of the interview, I regretted not having asked Frank about his wife. He has supplied the following note—BJ]

My wife, Frances Sharon Fling Okada, was born June 9, 1944, in Hillsboro, Ohio. We were married in Eugene, October 29, 1976. She says that being a farmer's daughter was good training to be a wife of a painter. Aside from teaching I probably log anywhere from 40 to 50 hours a week in my studio. I generally sleep early, arising between 4:00 and 5:00 in the morning, and work in the studio in the studio till 11:30 am and on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday teach in the afternoons. On Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, I work in my studio through the weekends. Fran has been very supportive, which has allowed me to pursue my commitment as a painter.—FO, December 1990.

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... *May 19, 2003*