



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Norton Wisdom,
2000 April 27

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Norton Wisdom on April 27, 2000. The interview was conducted at a restaurant in Beverly Hills, California by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Funded by the Pasadena Art Alliance.

Interview

NW: NORTON WISDOM

PK: PAUL KARLSTROM

EH: EMILY HOFSTATER

[TAPE 1, SIDE A]

PK: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, an interview with artist Norton Wisdom regarding one part of his experience in art school at Chouinard. The date is 27th April, 2000. The interviewer for this session in a restaurant in Beverly Hills -- the worst possible place to do such a thing but somehow it has glamour -- is Paul Karlstrom. Norton, we've already talked about this but we need it for the record. You were an art student at a very young age -- 14 years old, I think. On weekends -- Saturday at Chouinard and you had a particularly important experience and would you please tell us about the nature of this epiphany?

NW: Well, first of all I couldn't think of a more appropriate place to talk about my socialism than in a restaurant in Beverly Hills, but I did go to Beverly Hills High while I was going to Chouinard. My mom ran a restaurant in Beverly Hills. She was a single mom and worked very hard because the '60s women didn't have much. They didn't get any credit for working hard and running restaurants. She was raising three kids and I got enrolled in Chouinard by my father, the scoundrel, when I was 14. My first day and night class I came in and I sat down and here was this amazing woman naked -- nude -- in front of me and she was a very famous model. I didn't know that at the time.

PK: Do you remember her name?

NW: No, I don't, but everybody drew her. But anyway, I immediately ran to the front row and sat down and for me to realize that I could look at this woman and any part I wanted of this woman without being punished was to me something I never thought would happen. So I did this for about half an hour. I just stared, and finally I was saturated with this moral freedom and I took out my charcoal and my paper. I just was ready to begin when this beatnik Bohemian walked in with a shaggy dog and he said, "I want everybody to put away your drawing stuff. I want you to go home, I want you to call Hiroshima and I want you to talk to somebody who saw the bomb." He told the model to dress and he turned off the lights in the studio. Well, since the model dressed when he said it, I figured he was the instructor. I had no idea who this guy was. I went home that night. I took the Wilshire bus because Chouinard was downtown.

PK: Where did you live then?

NW: I lived right in Beverly Hills on Rodeo. The only slum in Beverly Hills -- there was one apartment house that was a slum on Rodeo. It was Rodeo and Robertson and the city hated it. People could see it from Wilshire. It's still there. It has a life of its own. So on the way home -- my mind was totally blank. I had no idea of anything outside the fact that I knew I couldn't call Hiroshima from home. My mom being a working single woman and I was trying to figure out how I could negotiate this call from a pay phone. How many quarters would it take? No idea what this would take. And another issue, how was I going to do this class assignment. I made one feeble attempt, I think. Nothing came through and this was the time of the transatlantic cables and everybody here is too young remember that but communication then was really close to Marconian. It was real communication. Lag time.

PK: You felt the distance.

NW: So anyway I never got the call through but that opened up my journey as an artist. It directed everything from that point on. I would never put art in front of people. I would essentially find anything that I had that somebody else didn't find embarrassing. Fame would always be something that would eventually turn on you and undo anything that you sincerely applied to the art that you made, and I brought something that showed you how these things were actually manifested.

Here are some photos. I ended up in Berlin after an art show and this time America was going to save Germany by neutron bombing them -- killing all the people by saving them from the Russians. And the Germans didn't

think that was such a good idea. So I didn't really like Germany but they're the only people who can stand my art at this time and I wanted to get off to Greece but they said, "How can you leave Germany, man?" There are 300,000 people marching on Bonn -- protesting this thing and I flashed back on this thing from Altoon, you know what I mean, never put art before people. Shall I protract this story just a tiny bit to tell you about Berlin? We're going to take this a little bit further. I was saying well, okay. I'm going to commit to finding out what's going on here and I ended up with this guy Herzog, who was a film maker, and this great sculptor, Nicoli Tragor, and we were going to go to the Berlin Wall and Nicoli was going to do a bas relief on it and I was going to paint it -- this was in the late '70's or probably early 80's and then Herzog, who had just made this film with Mick Jagger in Brazil and a bunch of people -- I mean, he was like riding on -- so he was going to auction off this thing. We're going to auction off our art on the Berlin Wall, so that if one day the Berlin Wall ever came down, which nobody thought would ever happen, these rich collectors would already have bought pieces of the wall. They would already own a piece of the wall, right? But what happened was Fostbinder asked me if I knew this guy named Dirty Harry -- he was on cable TV in New York -- who had exposed himself. He would hide in alleys and expose himself to people and then interview them and . . .

PK: Well, he would also get them to expose themselves.

NW: It was, yeah.

PK: Which is not a bad gig.

NW: No, it was a -- it's a job.

PK: And a lot of them did it.

NW: And anyway, I didn't know who this guy was, right? And Birder -- he had this Italian bombshell with him that he was trying to impress, but she was so fucked up on heroin she couldn't even stay awake but here he was trying to prove to me that I knew nothing about my country because I didn't know this guy that was interviewing these people nude and then I pointed out to him -- he had just got back from Aspen where he bought this cowboy belt and I pointed out to him, I said, "Oh, that's really interesting." I said, "I really like the buckle. That's a Heinrich Kley etching on the belt buckle," who was a very sort of famous academic German drawer at the turn of the century and then he called me -- then it went down hill and so we got in a big fight and then the sculptor - - the German sculptor realized he couldn't do it without permission, which is a very German thing. And I didn't think we were ever going to get permission to go on the Berlin so I went to the Black Forest -- took some acid. I was doing a mural in, I don't know, some castle out in the Black Forest and I took some acid. I went for a big run in the Black Forest with my Walkman listening to Wagner. And the whole cartoon thing, and when I came out of it I remembered Altoon's statement, you know what I mean? "And go home and call Hiroshima." Where would be the contemporary version? At this moment where would Hiroshima be? And where the bomb was about to go off was Berlin. So I left from the Black Forest and went to Berlin and then at this time you couldn't touch the wall - you couldn't touch the wall because it was strictly verboten and Kunst was very bullshit. Kunst was bullshit as the police would tell me. And so I couldn't paint on the west side. I had to jump over the wall and paint in East Berlin because I couldn't touch it on the west side because it was all patrolled by policemen and there was a death strip. I didn't know too much about Berlin. I didn't have the logistics down. Right on the other side were these self-shootin' machines. Anyway, I had to jump over and hang by this -- sit right next to the wall and then at night paint by the light of machine gun towers that had these big search lights. They would light it up and I had no idea. I figured that if the East Berlin police saw me that I would kind of salute them, they'd salute me, I would throw my Walkman and I would run, right? And then we'd meet at Disneyland sometime. That's what I thought, right? And I found out later there wasn't a lot of running going on. They didn't do a lot of running. There weren't big chase scenes in these issues. But besides that I painted the pictures with my urine -- because I couldn't leave. Once I got in there I had to stay for three days -- painted with my urine and Russian vodka so that was how I had to paint. Yeah. That's how all this stuff was painted and it was a big mural. It was a big mural. It went on this whole length, 150 meters. All these things started because in Vietnam I was doing -- I was up at Voulkos and I was doing figurative stuff . . .

PK: What about Voulkos?

NW: I was doing -- I was his foundry assistant with David Jones. And I was doing bronze figures at that time. But when the Vietnam War really got going I just felt so disgusted by my fellow man I couldn't do human figures anymore. I couldn't do anthropomorphic figures because I was just so disgusted at the human being and, you know, the figures had to go on a base where the classic base is a truncated pyramid so I cut off my figures and I ended up with this truncated pyramid, right? And I thought the one thing that is timeless is that we all need heroes, you know what I mean? And my father had read in a book about Aaron Burr and the famous -- I was always amazed at this - in New England if they found out he was a traitor they just cut him off at the feet and they left the base of this thing and a couple feet there and so that's basically what I did. I just chopped off my man during the Vietnam War and just had these empty bases, right? That's how these -- and then they

eventually turned into paintings. That's how the image evolved.

PK: But you've done -- like Ann's work -- the triptych . . . that we have in our house. And you must come up and see [unintelligible] is essentially the same -- working with the same form. Rearranging these same forms. And when was that done?

NW: No. This was started during the Vietnam War. Those pieces were started in '69 when I was just so disgusted I cut it off and just started doing these bases without human beings on them to show the empty base -- the empty pedestal. Actually when I was arrested -- the guy that arrested me took these pictures. I was arrested. Yeah, I was arrested because I had left West Berlin. They didn't have any other charge because you couldn't charge somebody for painting on the Berlin Wall because you couldn't touch the Berlin Wall. It was completely forbidden. Not until like in '85 when everybody painted on it. After the Glasnost there was a -- old women were trucked in to paint on it. But at this time you couldn't do it so I was arrested for leaving the country without a visa because I had jumped over the wall. And so the guy that arrested me took these pictures -- a big article in the tabloid paper.

EH: How'd you get the pictures then?

NW: He gave them to me because I was in jail. I was in jail and he was a nice guy. He loved it. I mean, he loved it! I remember the great interview, though. You'd love this, Paul, because it was for a tabloid because the real press couldn't touch it because that was -- the Berlin Wall was the political tool and they couldn't make light of it or they didn't want it to become an issue that would become too politically, you know what I mean, volatile? So the tabloids picked it up, though, [unintelligible], which was like the Star. [unintelligible], yeah. But everybody reads it because when I was being flown out by two security police who were flying me back to Munich out of Berlin. The pilot -- when I got up there he says, "Hey, aren't you the funstmeister that, you know, painted that shameful wall?" Anyway, what else was I going to say?

PK: I want you to go back a moment, though, to this epiphany which led you -- You haven't mentioned the name of the artist.

NW: Oh, John Altoon, I'm sorry.

PK: This is not an insignificant artist in the history of . . .

NW: This beatnik -- yeah, I'm sorry. The guy was John Altoon.

PK: All you said was there was this Bohemian . . .

NW: Yeah, it was a Bohemian but nobody knew then. He was just this soulful man who took me under his wing and then -- and during the further classes we'd go down into little Chouinard's library and he would show pictures of Gorky to me and we would just ruminate over Gorky's paintings and, you know what I mean? And then we'd go up to the class and women -- these women who were like fabulous -- they were bus drivers and housewives and just these dilettantes really loved art. I mean, they were really, you know what I mean? I mean, they were there for the best reasons of all, you know what I mean? Anyway, they would ask him how to draw a foot and he would get so outraged by the technique -- it has nothing to do with, you know what I mean? Drawing tubes on the end of a cylinder and all these artifices that people consider, you know what I mean? What people admire in art. He'd talk about the soul and anyway -- that was this silly little night class with this Altoon who couldn't get to teach anywhere else because he was always in an institute of one kind or another and . . .

PK: Some rehab center.

NW: And Gerald Norland was the director of Chouinard would bail him out and get him a job teaching night school.

PK: I was talking with Sam Clayberger today about this and he said, oh, and I told him your story as I remembered it, which is not too far off from what you've just reported. Sam said, "Oh well, you know, John had, well, he had a drug thing going so maybe," so Sam thought that was the explanation of -- this is important -- of this story. How Altoon could come into his own class and tell his students that, "No, this is not what you should be doing." In other words, the traditional drawing of the model. "You should be thinking," this is the way the story would be interpreted, "Thinking about other things. Use your mind then," what I'm doing is trying to work through what Altoon was up to -- what do you think Altoon was up to?

NW: Well, I think he was just up to the thinking that as all the Bohemians -- all the beatniks -- is that you had to get out and live, man. You had to get out and -- you couldn't get it from books, you couldn't get it from the studio, you had to get out and pray. I'm not going to go there about the drug thing. I think that drugs give you insight and anybody that argues with that is off their rocker. I mean, there's no question that, you know what I

mean? That they free up this academic lock, you know, this chain that makes you – as your buddy, [Richard Cánaída] Smith, said – as Smith said, right? Paul, you volunteer yourself into slavery to become productive, you know? So, you know what I mean?

PK: Ooh, ooh, it hurts.

NW: You know, so I'm not going to chase that ball. You know, I don't really care but, I mean, the thing that I . . .

PK: But what about that? What about this? Altoon is one of the great draftsmen in California.

[TAPE OFF – TAPE ON]

PK: So Norton, I have to ask this question because we have two things at work and I'm trying to understand what John Altoon, the very famous artist in California -- fabulous artist, fabulous draftsman -- the greatest thing about Altoon, in a way was, I think, his draftsmanship. Everybody says so. The line is unbelievable. Peter Selz says so. Fabulous. He's a great draftsman. The way you hone that skill is by this exercise that you were involved in as a 14-year old, right? In that class. He, nonetheless, walked in and said, I don't know what he said exactly but my impression is he said, "Why don't you do something important? Why don't you go call up Hiroshima?" And so he sent the model home and in a sense that would sound like, from your story, a denial of the importance of honing the skills of drawing and Altoon's one of the great draftsmen.

NW: Can I tell you something about draftsmanship? I think you could teach a monkey how to draw like a great draftsman within six weeks and it shouldn't take more than six hours for a human being to focus and learn what draftsmanship is. People who celebrate it are really amazingly misled that it's something of virtue. Having something to say, now that's another story. You can't learn that, right? And, I think really Altoon had something to say. I think his erotic drawings, I think, to focus on his line is to really justify his marginalization. You know what I mean?

PK: Really?

NW: I truly think that the real value of Altoon was this ferment of erotic revolution that was going on -- this crazy, nasty bestial thing that was about to evolve in our culture and, you know what I mean?

PK: This neediness.

NW: Needy? What do you mean neediness? I don't . . .

PK: The need. The need. There's so much of Altoon's need in these drawings. It's like Picasso. These are the closest things to Picasso's drawings of the artist, the monkey.

NW: Yeah.

PK: As an artist in the studio.

NW: Right. Yeah, very true. Very true. I don't know about the need part but, I mean . . .

PK: Human need.

NW: Yeah.

PK: And casting yourself as somebody who does – I think it'll pick up -- casting -- the artist recognizing -- it's like Eros in the studio. It's actually very much like that with Picasso it is a very complicated business, but he pictured himself as this monkey, this lecherous monkey, confronting the female model and finally it's the desire. Altoon's drawings are loaded with desire. A lot of it's frustrated. It's fantasy stuff. And that's actually what it's about but he draws it -- but the line -- to use it in art -- he actually can make a line that brings things to life. It's, I think, very exciting and -- so that's why I say that . . .

NW: No, let's go ahead with this. I wanted to say that, you know, I was there and I saw him draw on people's drawings when they'd ask him questions about, "How do you draw this? How do you draw that?" Demanding virtuosity of him and he hated it. He, I mean, he really would get angry at these people. You know, maybe he was protecting his little own jewels. He drew all over mine. I'm sad I can't find this stack of drawings that he would draw all over them.

PK: Yes, why didn't you save them?

NW: I did. I've saved everything. I just can't find them. They're underneath everything because this was a long time ago and he would draw all over these women's -- and I was there -- and anyway, let's go to our table.

[TAPE OFF – TAPE ON]

PK: Hey Norton, you know, the great thing when I interview you or I interview anybody it's all about you. It's not about me at all. I just ask questions that try to get results.

NW: No, I know, but for people to try to talk about drugs, I mean, maybe -- I'm not going to defend him . . .

PK: And that was only Sam's opinion.

NW: No, I know. I'm not going to defend it but it's . . .

PK: Sam's the guy, you know, that draws Emily here sitting next to me who is -- What are you? What are the boom? Coming to the performance with us.

NW: Sound maestro.

PK: And how did you understand what he was doing?

NW: I think it was an obvious trick, you know, to try and wake up some people. I had it happen to me one other time by another very interesting artist at Berkeley named -- he was teaching a class -- named Paul Cotton. Have you ever heard of Paul Cotton?

PK: Yeah, sure.

NW: Well, do you want to know what Paul Cotton did?

PK: No, I mean, yes, actually.

NW: It was another prank to throttle people like in Buddhism. You know, in Buddhism they use this technique to wake people up or to throw them into Nirvana and Paul had us -- it was the beginning of the class, nobody knew who Paul was. He had us make a sculpture -- it was a sculpture class. For two weeks we didn't have to come to class so everybody worked on their sculpture and then in two weeks we'd have a critique and so we all worked on our stuff and we built these things and I did this thing I was so proud of -- it was a big starburst, sunburst and it, you know, I was with Voukos at the time so I made this big thing out of ceramics and it was huge and manly and it was full of technique, man. It had -- just had virtuosic line in it and I had to form a morandi and it was just magnificent.

PK: Mirandi is great.

NW: It had all the crap in it. It had all that fucking shit. So after two weeks we had our critique so everybody brought their stuff in and put it on pedestals and we were all sitting there waiting and waiting for Paul to come in to start this critique and we waited and we waited and pretty soon an hour went by and nothing -- no Paul, and finally some guy in the class stood up and said, "I hate my thing. I hate my thing." And he grabbed it and he picked it up and threw it on the ground and everybody was just horrified and then he said, "And look at this crap," and he went up to somebody else's and he said, "Look at this shit. How could anybody be satisfied with this? It's so obvious. It's so pretentious. All you want to do is be loved," and he picked it up and he threw it so we had this psychotic. Well, this ended up in this huge orgy, right?

PK: Where was this?

NW: At Berkeley. At Berkeley. Everybody threw their stuff on the ground and we took off our clothes and we were shoving each other on the corner and the whole class pressed each other on one corner of the room and then we'd run to the other corner of the room and it was just incredible catharsis.

PK: Was David in that course?

NW: No. He's from the Midwest. He wouldn't be allowed there.

PK: Robert Hernandez, though?

NW: No, Robert wasn't in it. It was under division. These guys would never be in under division sculpture. It was under division like, you know, housewives and bus drivers. The real, you know. And then after this was over the guy who started it revealed himself -- took off this disguise he had -- it was Paul. He was the guy that set us up for this thing and from then on we started making sculpture and it was another thing to destroy this road block, you know what I mean? This -- these thugs, you know what I mean? That won't let you, you know what I mean? To make -- do what you're supposed to.

PK: So this was really another example of what Altoon was doing?

NW: Yes, exactly. I think that's what he was doing. He was doing what they do in Buddhism. He was giving you a, like a breakthrough tool, a shocking breakthrough tool that set your mind clear, it wipes the tablet -- that tabula rasa thing. When you pick up a slate then you wipe it clear.

PK: You said in that statement that you faxed to me today that this actually was a defining moment -- that Altoon class -- and that you left there, the slate was wiped clean and I took that to mean that this made then anything possible as art. That it just opened it up. Is that right? Am I understanding what you said?

NW: Well, anything unless art's for art's sake, you know, it basically said that, first of all, you have to be a human being. First of all you have to have pathos for your fellow man. You have to be a good person. You have to write -- you have to make sure you're not cruel. You know, you're not responsible, you know what I mean? For misfortune. By your good fortune it doesn't mean somebody has to be, you know what I mean? That has to suffer by the consequences. You're ecological, smudge mark on this planet doesn't mean the people in less fortunate areas, right, have less. So, I think that was the crux of it that led me to -- when I started, actually to kind of ascend in the art world like in the early 70's, like I started getting galleries everywhere, I became very suspicious because of this kind of epiphany that I had that first day of art. And I went through from all my galleries saying, "I don't want to be a famous artist. I want to be a, -- you know what I mean? A real artist and a real artist is probably not famous and by that I mean like with this guy Balshim, who was another -- he became a mentor of mine -- this Jewish mystic from the 15th century and you know Balshim, you heard of any of his stuff?

PK: No, I have not read any of his stuff.

NW: He said that -- I don't mean to back you into a corner -- I'll need to check your credentials, sir. I need to check that card again. Balshim said to be - not to be recognized by your fellow man during your lifetime is not to understand man. Not to be recognized in 500 years after you're dead is not to understand God. So with these tools it gives you some pretty good equipment to forge along without becoming a problem. Without your art becoming a problem rather than . . . with Altoon, I think, it mentioned, is go out and find out what's going on in the world. Find out what man's really like. Find out who you're really entertaining by hanging your paintings on the homes of the wealthy. Now this was to turn into an Nuremburg trial now that we're in L. A. We like to have -- we would like to have Norton Simon step up and ask how those Indians in South America got the smallpox. See? Now that's what Altoon would've probably said. You know what I mean? He wouldn't be interested in the virtuosic line, right? Anymore than he would be what the man who collects art had done to get the money to buy the art. So, you know, that's how . . .

[TAPE 1, SIDE B]

PK: Is it there yet? Continuing this wacky Pastaio . . .

NW: This has turned into a vicious assault on . . .

PK: . . . this Il Pastaio restaurant interview with the colorful and enigmatic Norton Wisdom who pontificates during oral histories, but we're grateful that he does. Okay. This is Archives of American Art interview tape one, the last tape, side two. Norton, what were you going to talk about? Oh, technique.

NW: Paul, would you please take the bottle out from between your -- from your lap and pass it around the table? No, I'm just kidding. This is quite a sober evening. But I am going to say that Paul, in the last three years, has been very diligent and supportive of trying to prop up the art world in Southern California. He has single-handedly gone out every night, beaten himself to death, driven -- no, driven, you know, back and forth across town -- zigzagging across town twice today -- in a town that's -- it's not built for these kinds of things. It's just not, you know what I mean? It's undoable. And he does it without even flinching. And these Philistines are throwing rocks at him from the freeway underpasses, overpasses trying to prevent him, "Uh, he going to go back to another thing. He's goin to try and give this artist encouragement." Anyway -- he's come for the last three years to almost every performance I've done. You know what I mean?

PK: When it's here. Yeah, when it's here.

NW: When it's here, he's been there and -- and they're late and they're in bowling alleys and they're in the 'hood, and sometimes and they're -- but he's never seen me draw because we're talking about facility and virtuosic line and the academic technique of drawing, of this line that Altoon celebrated to him. I'm calling the last three years of my performance have been doo doo. Doo doo drawing. Doo doo performance. And you probably even said that.

PK: Not doo dah.

NW: Not doo dah. But, right? I haven't had time to take the six hours in the last three years to learn how to draw, like to learn the virtuosic line, the line of the genius, right? And I've had the six hours in the last week to learn how to draw.

PK: Really?

NW: So tonight you're going to see the virtuosic line, which I'm sure will be very arid, you know what I mean? And it probably will be very arid and very uninspiring because it's not full of -- and I quote -- "the life," the spontaneous life. It's going to be full of . . .

PK: Central imagery, I hope.

NW: It'll be central imagery but it'll be full of anticipation or the artist -- instead of listening to the music because I perform with musicians, right? Instead of listening to the music and finding -- mining my images out of the now, I will come with this pre-proposed facility in knowing how to resolve things without listening. I'll know how to take a line and instead of look at it I'll know how to say, "I wonder where this line would go if it was going to draw itself." I'll draw it as though I've drawn it in the last six hours. Why and I learning how to draw? Well, because it's much easier to have facility and then to draw from life -- draw from human experience. Why am I doing it? Well, because have been putting up with that, that live shit long enough. Now I've got to impress them a little bit. I've got to get the audience like going, "Wow, what a great artist."

PK: You know, I feel like a fool.

NW: I'll probably be crap tonight. You know, it usually is when I'm foreshadowing crap.

PK: So I feel like a fool because I admire greatly Norton's facility when he responds to the music or at least that's the idea that there's a connection -- it's like this whole Wagnerian, avant-garde symbolist connection where the music has it's equivalency and the visual arts and the imagery but you draw fabulously at these performances.

NW: But see, that's not drawing. I'm drawing the music and the light. I'm not using a line.

PK: No, you just don't know you're doing the line. You're absolutely . . .

NW: Well, we'll see tonight. We'll see what . . .

PK: All right.

NW: . . . if you can see tonight. I'm calling . . .

PK: Okay. This is it. I'm going to critique it then afterwards.

NW: Yeah. Mannerism. You're going to be calling it mannerism. French frou-frou. You're going to say -- you're going to probably walk out and call it -- this is French frou-frou except there's an incredible tabler player playing tonight. A tabler player. An Indian tabler player. You know, the Indian drummer? He's just so gorgeous, Boom Boom, you're going to just die.

EH: Let's see if you can keep to your virtuosic line, dude. Let's see if you can or if you won't be able to break out and do a little life in there, huh?

NW: I'm going to shut my ears. Like Ulysses, man. I'm going to put wax in my ears. I'm going to have the crew wax my ears.

PK: Silence. Silence. I hope that you will do a special -- I want Norton to talk about what we're going to be seeing tonight because it's very interesting and it actually has enchanted me and captured my imagination and that's why I keep going back. Not just that I like Norton. But during your -- as you transform these images -- these shape changings -- I think you need to, at some point, do something special for Boom Boom. Will you give her a hint?

NW: I'm going to be drawing Boom, Boom.

EH: Oh. Thank you.

PK: In your imagination -- in your fantasies?

NW: No, I'm going to be drawing her onstage and eventually you're going to be overexposed.

EH: Oh, would a monkey suck their thumb?

NW: No. You're going to be over -- let me tell you the story of my wife. Let me tell you the story of my wife. Let me tell you the story of my wife. Let me tell you the story of Robin. She'll be in one of my performances . . .

PK: Is Robin going to be there tonight?

NW: No, she's not going to make it. My wife will be sitting at one of my performances . . .

PK: She's very fabulous.

EH: I've heard. Yes.

NW: . . . and she'll be sitting there and everybody going -- at the table going, "Hey, that's you, Robin. Norton's painting you. He's painting you." And she goes, "Yes, and pretty soon in the painting the whole band's going to be fucking me." And they look at her in horror and then next thing you know all these hands come in from out, you know what I mean? As the music turns dark and motifs, you know, turn to like a d minor and these dirges start forming, you know, the sinister elements start creeping up behind her and pretty soon the people at the table with Robin are just like, "Oh, my God. Robin, you're being . . ."

PK: Ravaged.

NW: You know, what I mean, that's -- and she does it -- and it happens to her so much she says it with such indifference, "Oh yeah, pretty soon the band will be fucking me in this painting."

PK: Is that what Robin says?

NW: All the time. It happens all the time. It's a good ploy when I think the audience is not looking. You know what I mean? I'll just go to someplace that they'd never thought the music would -- and I'll take the musicians there because most of the musicians I play with will start finding the images. The music will direct the music -- the images will direct the music and so it all sort of -- it's like what jazz should be.

PK: Now, Norton, since this is an official tape for the Smithsonian's research collections . . .

NW: Do you need my birth date?

PK: No, I don't care about that. I know you're old. The oldest lifeguard in -- no, you're not but you're . . .

NW: No, I'm the highest paid lifeguard in the world. Now that's . . .

PK: Now, do you know this? Do you know this?

NW: Yes, I know. A matter of fact, James Matters is striking a coin right now as we speak in honor of me being the highest paid lifeguard in the world.

PK: Oh, could we get one in your papers for the Archives?

NW: Yes.

PK: Okay. Now, how do you pause?

[TAPE OFF - TAPE ON]

NW: I heard that models actually in California had to register as sex offenders. I heard that when I was in class in Chouinard and that they had to register when they entered a town, you know, I mean, as a sex offender. You used to have this big Puritanical mantle that all these child molesters donned, you know, like -- I'm not going to mention Mulholland. I'm not going to bring up the past but, you know, all these founding fathers, right? Cast as this great moral society and they were so bankrupt and Paul immediately chastised me and said that didn't happen. I don't know. This is what I was told. You know what I mean? That to be a model in the 50's and the 60's was to cross a line that they didn't want you to cross back. It was like that scarlet letter. I don't know. They were heroes and they were part of the fabric of the art community. I mean, they were -- I never went to a soirée when the models weren't there. You know, they were definitely -- everybody knew that it was -- there was no difference to be drawn or -- well, it's like Altoon. What is the difference if you're the subject or the object?

PK: Oh dear, that's the question. That's another session.

NW: I mean, but it basically is . . .

PK: Who's in charge.

NW: You know and that's what's going to happen tonight with -- with the way I see my performances I see the paintings as a pile of crap and I figure the audience is just filling in the blanks. They're just trying to hope that I'm going to succeed. They're seeing the drawings for the potential in them, not really what they really are. I always assume that when somebody comes up to me and says, "Oh, I was -- that thing and the cross and the female and the cross," I mean, all that -- that they basically did that painting themselves. I only suggested the possibility, the potential and in their mind they painted the painting not wanting me to fail not be embarrassed being on stage. Yeah. I feel that -- I pretty much think that's a lot of it. You know what I mean? because I get out there and I go, "Oh my God. What a bunch of shit." You know. How do I get out of this? There'd better be a back door.

PK: Really?

NW: It takes me about two weeks before I can even stand to even look at, you know . . .

PK: I have such a different experience. I mean, I think it's fabulous and I think that you -- what that is all about to me is everything changing. This is about our life experience. It changes, it transforms. You think you're coming -- progressing to a conclusion for an image and then he changes it and he turns it into something else. And it's a fabulous metaphor for life. That's what I think.

NW: You're offering permanence. You know, not to objectify what's on -- things you think of are valuable. You know, to be able to destroy things that are established as virtuosic or to be able to say, "Oh, you think this is virtuosic? Fuck it." And wipe it off. Going, so what? What is it going to do us? What good's that virtuosic line to people that don't have one? I mean, what a drag. So, that's one of the agendas is another thing to race back to Altoon. The crux of these performance pieces is the impermanence, right? To create something and then to say, "Hey, this is art. This is crap." You know, I mean we had a great time but, you know, there's shit goin' out on the street, man. That's the beatnik thing. You know, we had a great time in here tonight. The musicians played but when the music stops, where's the music gone? When the music stops . . .

PK: Where's the picture?

NW: I'm sure that the foundation of this all was that him telling the model, "Put on your clothes. Get out of here. Go live, go pray." I always figured if you could never destroy a great painting you never could've painted it in the first place. I mean, that's where the real -- I mean cornerstones that if you have to protect this, it probably really isn't that great. If you can't paint another one and will then you're just clutching -- you're just grasping at what? Straws? What do you grasp at? So . . .

EH: It's all by chance anyway.

PK: This is actually more than we expected.

EH: Just for the hell of it, can you describe the model again?

NW: The model was this amazing woman -- rotund. She had full breasts, knees, you know, everything was just these giant, luscious lapping -- everything was lapped over. You know, everything was a sexual organ and you could've made love to any section of her. And like paintings -- a part of a painting -- any part of a painting should be a genius. I mean, you could -- that's why you could cut up a painting and any cubic inch of a big painting -- that cubic inch should be a great painting. I think it is. I think there's no such thing as having a central part that's great and the rest is not considered [done] by an artist. For some reason if you look at -- who I think is a great painting like De Kooning. You could cut up any section of a De Kooning and it would be a painting in itself. And that was what this model was like. You could just take a big chunk of her and, "I'm going to fuck this little knee, man." I'm going to just, you know, until she just gets the other knee and like knocks me off like some bug. But until she knocks me off, man, I'm going to be there lathering up. And she was real famous. Everybody had painted her. She was like the cornerstone. I mean, Jim Graham -- I have seen drawings of his and all those guys who really are bigger painters.

PK: We need to find out who she is. I think Sam [Clayberger] knows. He would know.

END OF INTERVIEW

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