



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

**Oral history interview with Kelly O'Neill,
2000 Feb 15**

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Kelly O'Neill on February 15, 2000. The interview took place in Los Angeles, CA, and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Paul Karlstrom has reviewed the transcript. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, taped interview with Kelly O'Neill, Artist, and for the purposes of this interview, an artists' model as well. The interview is begin conducted at Kelly's residence/loft studio in The Brewery, Moulton Avenue, downtown Los Angeles. And this is the first in a series of interviews on the theme of the artist and the model, probably about one hour long, unless we find that we need to do more than that today. The date is 15—day after Valentine's Day.

KELLY O'NEILL: Fifteen.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, February 15, 2000. This is the first interview, actually, I've conducted in 2000, I believe. The interviewer for the archives is Paul Karlstrom, and what we will be discussing primarily is Kelly's observations based on her experience as an artist/model. I should say by way of introduction that I met Kelly. She's here because she participated in a survey, filled out a questionnaire that was directed to her, given to her, for models, five models, who posed over the years, actually starting in the mid-'60s until quite recently when Kelly posed for the artist, Sam Clayberger. Sam has been an artist in Los Angeles for many years. He's retired now, taught at Chouinard, attended Chouinard, taught at Chouinard, and also much longer at Otis. And at any rate, the interviewer, Paul Karlstrom, was asked some months ago, perhaps a year ago, by Sam to write an introduction for a publication which ended up involving a series, I think 16, basically reproductions of his drawings, erotic drawings, by his definition, and so this amounted to a suite, limited to 80, and numbered and so forth, hand-printed, letter press, Clinker Press in Pasadena. And the introduction stands almost as a separate element. It is entitled "Eros in the Studio" which should be self-explanatory. At any rate, Kelly filled out a questionnaire, not knowing the author and having not known Sam that long, and so her story, in a very limited way, became part of this "Eros in the Studio." So Kelly, that's a long introduction, but I think now, anybody listening to this will know how this came about, why we're sitting here. And I guess what I would like briefly in the beginning is for you to tell me a little bit about yourself, a little bit about your background and how you came to be here and your connection with the art world, and, well, the fact that you're studying [art] and so forth. What's going on with you? How did it come about?

KELLY O'NEILL: Well, modeling, the modeling started in Sacramento about two and a half years ago. I had gone to an art opening with a woman who I worked with at the time at the co-op up there who was a model for a prominent Sacramento artist and we went to his opening, and she was just so self-assured and seemed so together that I guess there was a little bit of me that just kind of wanted—I wanted some of that. I wanted that positive—she was the model and she was going to this opening and there were paintings of her up all over, and she was just radiant and enthusiastic and it seemed like such a great way to participate in the art world which I have always been a little petrified, to put it bluntly, about just the interaction in the higher realms of the art world. It's been one thing to just draw and paint for myself, but—so it was just a very nice, easygoing introduction to it, and she got me connected with a woman in Sacramento who kind of is a self-appointed artists' model head there, and—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do they have a league [guild], like a models' league there in Sacramento?

KELLY O'NEILL: It is kind of a league. Well what she's got going on, it's not like the—I know there's a union in San Francisco.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

KELLY O'NEILL: If she is the head of it, which she may be at this point, it's actually called "Drawma Darling" I think is her little—and so it's not unionized.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

KELLY O'NEILL: She sends out a little packet of information.

PAUL KARLSTROM: A clearinghouse really, contact point.

KELLY O'NEILL: Contact point, basically, yeah. She's done it for a long time and she's done it in different towns and she knows just the basics of what anybody needs to know to go into the business and just bring in your own timer and your own props and what to do if you feel uncomfortable and all those things, so she's very helpful. And the first session I went to was at a little studio, kind of a group studio in Sacramento, and there were five of us total, and she posed for the first-half of the session, three male artists, and the two of us. I had actually sketched her through the first section, and then she asked if I wanted to do double poses with her to start and I said oh, I'd go for it and I got up there and broke into a horrible sweat, just so afraid, and they were kind of telling a joke at the same time I was disrobing and I was like beside myself, thinking that they were laughing at me disrobing which was just horrific. So it was—but then, of course, I kind of recall what they were talking about and got properly relaxed; took a little while, and she came up and like would help prop pillows around me and get me feeling comfortable, and everybody was very sweet. And, of course, I kind of lost myself in it and it's just this very meditative procedure. You just kind of stare at a space on the floor and try not to fall asleep or try not to slouch too much into your position. At the break, I just ran up and checked what everybody had done and it was just fascinating.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What did you think when—was this a short pose or a longer one?

KELLY O'NEILL: Let's see, how did it start. I think I did probably like three—I think I started doing a couple of long poses, 15-minute poses, not really long, but I had watched her go through the five-minute sketches and stuff like that and it was—I guess I hadn't really prepared myself to be a woman of action at that point, and I mean I'm still a little amateur in that, but it is a fun challenge, I mean just trying to think of one pose to the next while you're in something. It's very single-minded and fun. There's nothing really unpleasant about it that I've found so far.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was this like a workshop? Was it associated with a school?

KELLY O'NEILL: It was an independent studio for local artists that they—

PAUL KARLSTROM: So they pay their fee and—

KELLY O'NEILL: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sort of like what Sam actually—

KELLY O'NEILL: Exactly. It seems very similar, yeah. One of the fellows that I met that day was Jian Wang who is a fellow who studied with Wayne Thiebaud for quite a while and—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Would you spell his name, please?

KELLY O'NEILL: J-I-A-N, he's Chinese, Wang. And he's a very sweet fellow who's lived in this country for about, I don't know, about 15 years with his wife and he's doing really well for himself in Sacramento. And actually, that was the only day that I—no, I posed one other time at that studio, but I started working primarily for Jian after that independently at his house.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me ask you two questions. Let's hope I can remember the second after I ask the first.

KELLY O'NEILL: Okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you said that you—in the break in this initial session, between poses, you got up and went around and looked at what the artists were doing, what they had done with you.

KELLY O'NEILL: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was your response? What were you thinking about seeing yourself?

KELLY O'NEILL: Well, it's very interesting. Actually, I did a couple things prior to that in another life-drawing class out at the community college, just portrait stuff. I like everything about it. I love the sound of the charcoal and pencil and paper and just knowing that I'm being kind of scrutinized as an object. And so when I got up, I mean I went from the complete fear factor of dropping my robe in front of strangers to getting up nude off the stand and wandering around the studio to look. I mean I'd forgotten about my robe. I was like I wanted to see, you know, because these were very accomplished artists. The results were very pleasing. I mean I could tell that my poses were awkward, that they weren't as comfortable as I think I've gotten a little more. But the portrait class that I'd done was mostly amateur students and it was not as flattering, but it was really interesting and it does take you away from yourself. I mean it does help you realize that you're an object to be manipulated, and not personally, it's just you—and you're not an object of beauty. You're not an object of inspiration necessarily. Some people are

just kind of like, "Oh, God," they get the worst angle in the class and they have to do whatever they can with it and—

PAUL KARLSTROM: They cope.

KELLY O'NEILL: They have to cope. And so it's hardly just pure strokes. I don't feel like it's—I haven't seen anything yet that has made me just miserable. What was your second question?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Before going on to the second question—

KELLY O'NEILL: Okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —part of the reason I asked you that was I would imagine models, and particularly new ones, and we're going to be talking about really is the amateur as much more than professional which, at that point, you have become; you're being paid. That's how it [inaudible]. But one would think that their expectations of how you would be converted through the artist's eyes into something very special, hopefully connected to you. The idea of—well, you said that you didn't see yourself as an inspiration necessarily, but did the results match your self-conception, your self-image?

KELLY O'NEILL: Well, yeah. I guess I've had these certain ideas about what my body style is and all of that for years. I mean it definitely was reflected in that, you know. I wasn't surprised by anything that they were coming up with and it was good that they were so accurate with some details that I'm pretty familiar with so that I could take their word for, in a visual sense, what else was going on, what I would like from that perspective, ways that I haven't seen myself before. But when I was thinking of poses, I was definitely trying to think of what shadows might fall, what shadows might fall that might make me look somehow strange, but what I might want to see up there, what lines I would want to see, what negative space. I'd want to see all those things. It helps, I think, if you're an artist, it can help to actually make you a better model. It may make you more self-conscious, but it may also get more work from the artists that are drawing you that you would want to see or that you would want to inspire or you would want to create yourself.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now were you an art student yet at that time or is this prior to your—

KELLY O'NEILL: I've pretty much always been an art student, but I've actually only taken—I had taken one life-drawing class at the University of Washington in 1986 and the model was so bossy. I had never experienced such—I mean it was such a new thing for me and she was like, you know, "Shut that window over there; bring me my robe." She was just about as crabby as you could get an image—the teacher, I don't even remember who the teacher was, but she definitely was in charge of the arena. It was very interesting, not the same feeling that I get when I'm in there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well were you an art major at the University of Washington?

KELLY O'NEILL: I was, yes, I was. I just kind of took my time getting around to actually focusing on it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Excuse me for bouncing around a little bit, but may as well get at this now. What about your school experiences? And I don't mean as a model, but as an artist, or not even as an artist, but as a student yourself. You moved around a bit, I know that much, but what schools did you go to and why or what were you focused on in terms of your interest in your study?

KELLY O'NEILL: Well, I started at the University of Washington in '86 and then was there for about a year and a half. I just kept taking breaks because I wasn't sure what a formal education was going to give me. I didn't think that necessarily getting an art degree was going to lead to anything and I was still, at that time, especially at the University of Washington, their art department was a little stuffy. It presented the art world in the way that I'd always kind of worried the art world would be, people not interacting in a friendly, unpretentious way. It was definitely—it may have been my teenage imagination, but it was definitely an unpleasant atmosphere. But I went to San Francisco State after that, had a wonderful experience there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When was that, Kelly?

KELLY O'NEILL: San Francisco State was 1990 through like '93.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And who were some of your professors, if you remember?

KELLY O'NEILL: Leonard Hunter, a wonderful fellow. I had a ceramics professor who I can't—I think I blocked my—he was so disagreeable that I just kind of blocked him from my memory. This woman, Cherie Raciti, who was wonderful, most amazing mind for details and how things work, and you could ask her anything. She was great. That actually turned me around. It made me want to study art, but I was still kind of taking set design and screen writing and starting a small business, just anything that I could fit into my schedule that interested me,

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PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you know Bob Bechtle?

KELLY O'NEILL: No.

[Side conversation.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: We were talking about school and you were at State and—

KELLY O'NEILL: San Francisco State.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —I think I asked you if you knew Bob Bechtle. The reason is he's a friend of mine and he's one of the prominent professors at San Francisco State.

KELLY O'NEILL: What does he teach?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Photo realist painter.

KELLY O'NEILL: Oh, really?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

KELLY O'NEILL: Okay. I don't think I got too far into my painting there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Maybe he was doing it with grad students or something mainly.

KELLY O'NEILL: It's possible. Actually, I didn't take any drawing or painting there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, really?

KELLY O'NEILL: Cherie Raciti was a mixed-media teacher. I don't know if it was just—I hadn't actually started painting yet. I was still just kind of messing with other projects.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well so you had had at the University of Washington some contact with models and so this wasn't a complete mystery to you.

KELLY O'NEILL: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Several questions—well no, wait, I'm sorry. What state—'cause I know that you moved around a little more. Is that right?

KELLY O'NEILL: I went up to Portland and spent—and finished my degree up there, had some painting teachers there, finally had—started painting—

PAUL KARLSTROM: That was an art major?

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah, it just wound up being kind of an overall degree, but I did finally get some painting classes in and felt that that was where I was supposed to go. So, yeah, that was a very good experience, and now graduate school at Cal State LA which is—the jury is still out on this, but—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well last I heard you talking about this, you were quite pleased with it.

KELLY O'NEILL: I'm impressed by a lot of the other students, but I'm kind of a little disappointed in the faculty's enthusiasm or lack of enthusiasm about the program. I mean they're talented as well, but they certainly don't give themselves any credit for much of anything really.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you have any life-drawing classes there?

KELLY O'NEILL: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No?

KELLY O'NEILL: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, so my impression is that you're from the other side of the easel. I mean you're interesting because you've been on both sides, but it sounds as if your experience is a bit limited in terms of

being on the artist side, the few life-drawing classes, and so that would presumably, at least in the earliest experiences, give you a sense of the dynamic, the phenomenon within a classroom situation. What we're going to be talking about is a non-classroom situation and it's much more loaded with other issues potentially and we'll get into that a little bit when we know exactly what they are. One way to do that is in Sacramento, you were posing for this workshop, this private studio situation. But then you began posing privately for Jian Wang whom you admire and seem to have fond memories of. I don't know, maybe—do you keep up with him at all?

KELLY O'NEILL: Yes, actually. We were supposed to go to Vegas together.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were? Well tell me about that.

KELLY O'NEILL: Well, Jian, he's a wonderful—

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's Jian, it's not Jian [pronouncing it two different ways], okay.

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah. He's probably about 40. He's really a self-made artist and has really a phenomenal setup as far as what I've seen artists, you know, living with. He has a wife and a 14-year-old daughter, and he's—without going into too much detail, I mean we've had a lot of conversations about the dynamic of artist and model and his own kind of romantic ideas about that leading to things, that it's the idea that you would have a muse that would provide you with life inspiration and someone you just—

[TAPE OFF]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sorry about that break in this prima donna ever-repaired tape recorder. I do apologize, Kelly.

KELLY O'NEILL: Oh, that's fine.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm very interested in—tell me all about that, these conversations. I have a feeling that it could be very much to the point.

KELLY O'NEILL: It was very odd. The first meeting, I drove out quite a ways to his house. He'd told me already that his wife and daughter would be there and they were kind of off in their other rooms. It's a very large house, and he showed me around, showed me a lot of his work, showed me his studio, and then we went into a guest room, basically a guest bedroom where he set up just kind of, I assume, kind of uncomfortably at a chair and I disrobed and—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you do that in front of him? I mean—

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah. It was a little odd.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you started taking your clothes off?

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah. It was a little bit awkward just because I put my trust in a lot of strangers in general, but this was so—

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you had already posed for him in the—

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah, and I had gotten the okay with—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —workshop?

KELLY O'NEILL: —[inaudible] as far as—and his work spoke for him and it just felt comfortable; plus he's much smaller than I am and I could have taken him. So I got comfortable on this guest bed and did poses for about three hours there, and went back probably a week later and he took me out to lunch afterwards and we talked and he admitted some things about how his wife is very independent and needing to find some things of her own to do. And he was kind of, in a very innocent way, kind of trying to set up an excuse to say that he could have an affair if it lent itself to that, his own romantic ideas about this and that he always thought that the artist would probably get more out of their work if the artist was involved or the model was somehow involved with the artist. I quickly was able to turn it around just because, for one, I'm not into having an affair with a married person, let alone having an affair with someone I'm posing for. It's not work—

PAUL KARLSTROM: But were you attracted to him as a person?

KELLY O'NEILL: No. I mean I can see his attractiveness as a person, but I don't—I think because so much, too, in a working relationship, I'm sometimes pretty immune to that kind of stuff. I mean maybe I wouldn't be and I'm curious to see if that ever happens where I'm in a situation where I'm being drawn by somebody whom I'm attracted to. That kind of frightens me. It's like I'll probably run to put my clothes right back on,

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PAUL KARLSTROM: Well you might, but then again—

KELLY O'NEILL: Then yeah, you just don't know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What one doesn't know.

KELLY O'NEILL: No, not at all.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well so, go on, please, about this sort of the development of this kind of relationship.

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah. I mean we've had many meals together and had more sessions. He came down here about a year ago and we went to some different shows. I mean he definitely likes to talk about his life with me which is nice and I feel comfortable with him as well, but it's—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well what is his life with you? I see, he talks about his life—

KELLY O'NEILL: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —to you.

KELLY O'NEILL: Right, exactly. So I mean it's not—I don't feel at liberty to really talk about his life, but it was a very nice, warm, open friendship, and I think that—I believe that his wife was actually kind of trying to convince him that he needed to go and find some other things to try out because they've been together for a really long time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean a lover?

KELLY O'NEILL: A lover, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

KELLY O'NEILL: I mean even his daughter knew that he was interested in maybe pursuing something with a model, not necessarily me. But I met his wife and had a nice kind of casual conversation with her and not—I just don't ever see myself as being a threat to other women in that way, and especially since she was so open to me as—I don't know. It was a little odd.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. What do you think of that? Because that now, I mean I think you would agree, has moved from the moment you went into the bedroom, which could be a studio as much as any other place, but then took your clothes off without the usual professional benefit of going off, as at Sam's, you know, and to put on a kimono if you want to—

KELLY O'NEILL: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —but at least have this transition moment from the real world to the world of studios.

KELLY O'NEILL: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And it sounds to me as if these two worlds were absolutely coming together where one—it wouldn't necessarily be evident to you, but in my hearing it, it is as if the intention was to blur those lines and, therefore, maybe make possible a whole different kind of connection.

KELLY O'NEILL: Well it's interesting, too, he—I'd forgotten this, but he draws on book pages. I mean he's got kind of an unconventional way of doing things, so he'll set up a nude on top of a chapter heading or something like that. It was so new to me, that all of it struck me as very unconventional and I didn't really know how I was expected to feel, but I knew that it was much more familiar than just getting up on a stand where you're definitely—

[Side conversation.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Up on the stand—

KELLY O'NEILL: Just where you're definitely an object apart from another person in the room. You're a still life, basically.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is not the way you felt?

KELLY O'NEILL: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No.

KELLY O'NEILL: No, not in the guest bedroom, no. It was very different.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's actually turn this over now.

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PAUL KARLSTROM: Continuing this interview session with artist/model Kelly O'Neill. It's still the 15th of February 2000. The interviewer for the archives is Paul Karlstrom. The theme of the interview is artists and models. Kelly, you've been describing what is perhaps not that unusual of a situation, but it moves right exactly into the territory of "Eros in the Studio"—

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —and the situation in which professionalism is abridged and there's no getting around it. And it would seem to me that this can only happen really with both parties, well, both parties—it's like a collaboration. You can't have an entirely professional position on one of the party's side. Do you agree with this? How did you feel about it? Did it seem like a big adjustment or just a little one as you began to understand that this was a lot about Kelly, the person, and maybe Kelly as a potential mistress or at least as somebody with whom there's more than just a professional—

KELLY O'NEILL: Well I can honestly say, I mean when I was just a single individual posing for a married individual, my gut feeling was definitely like a very strong ethic about just keeping it as professional as possible, but I did feel a certain kind of, I don't know, sadness or—not like I was being deceptive, but somehow like it's just not—I wouldn't want to be a threat to someone. The fact that I get up there to do this for me, that it's an empowering and liberating thing for me to do shouldn't come at the cost of some other woman being insecure. One afternoon for both sculptural possibilities and other drawing possibilities, Jian videotaped me basically writhing around on the coffee table in the living room.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Riding around?

KELLY O'NEILL: Writhing, writhing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, writhing.

KELLY O'NEILL: You know, yes, it's a lovely term, but I mean doing all kinds of different poses, and when he liked one that he thought he might use for a sculpture, he would have me freeze and go, take some angles—

PAUL KARLSTROM: So he's mainly a sculptor or a painter?

KELLY O'NEILL: Both, both. But at one point, his wife came home with their daughter and I mean she knew that this was going on and there was absolutely nothing wrong about it, but there was suddenly—like if she'd been there the whole time drawing me or somehow a part of this, it wouldn't have felt so kind of, I don't know, something didn't quite feel right about it for me as far as—I felt a little walked in on, I guess.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How about manipulated?

KELLY O'NEILL: Not manipulated, no, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me suggest—

KELLY O'NEILL: Okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —just what I mean by this—

KELLY O'NEILL: Sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —and then you, of course, you set me straight, but what immediately comes to mind is that for whatever motives and whatever their reasons may be, you become then a player in their life game.

KELLY O'NEILL: It if had been different people, maybe. I can definitely see that, but they're so innocent and sweet and I mean it really—

PAUL KARLSTROM: You sure about that?

KELLY O'NEILL: Not a hundred percent. I don't know them really, really well, but their honesty, both of their honesties about the idea that they've been together for a long time, not that they—no elements of swinger—I mean the fact that their daughter was privy to all this, I mean it's kind of like how much more wholesome can you get for a semi-unwholesome situation. I mean it's, you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you ever see "Sirens"?

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah, I did. It's kind of—I don't know. There's kind of a feeling like that where people are just kind of there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where you created an extended family, but it involves—you didn't have to swing at night on - [a swing set, as in the movie]

KELLY O'NEILL: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The fairies, the model fairies.

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah, yeah. No. I can definitely see that being a scenario somewhere else, but it just didn't—I guess because I was so disinterested in that part of it. I didn't want to be anybody's anything, that it was like I wouldn't mind being friends and that just happened naturally, but—and then he did invite me to go to Vegas at one point to—you know, he's living a pretty conventional life up in Sacramento and he was thinking he could go to Vegas and get some more inspiration. I don't exactly know what he had in mind as far as different drawing possibilities. I mean I don't see myself standing naked on the Sunset—on the Strip, basically, and getting drawn, but I—it just sounded like he was trying so hard to fulfill some fantasies, at the same time being very prolific and painting the sunset every night in Sacramento and living a conventional life.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did he ever declare himself in any way towards you other than by sort of a shy suggestion? I get the impression that there is kind of a reticence.

KELLY O'NEILL: Totally, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you got the picture, didn't you?

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah. I mean nothing ever suggestive beyond like signing cards, "I miss you, fondly, Jian," you know, kind of thing, but yeah, he's just too modest and too—I mean I think there's a lot of other cultural—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you ever think that he might be, to some degree, in love with you, that there was this possibility that for whatever reason, that his need was focused on you? This is besides having a model who could then sort of ignite creative activity. Did this ever occur to you that this was moving into the highly personal arena?

KELLY O'NEILL: I think I might have been one of his crushes for a while. I mean he'd talked about other models that he—one that had gone off to school and that he still would send checks to every once in a while when he'd sell something and then he always felt kind of protective of and all of that. And he still has that with me. I mean I think that's just a side bonus for a lot of these men. I mean where the women are getting a certain amount of—I mean if this is a male artist, female model situation only, the women get a certain kind of reassurance of their esthetic desirability or whatever, but men—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well I mean—excuse me.

KELLY O'NEILL: I think the men get just as much satisfaction in being kind of a protector of that. They see the vulnerability that the women are exposing to them. They take a personal pride in guarding.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's sort of like being married, in a sense, or at least in many marriages anyway, certainly the old-fashion kind where you are protective.

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so there's a dynamic that you're describing already that's very close to pairing, domestic marital pairing, and what interests me is how it could be made okay. Obviously, if it gets too threatening, it wouldn't be, but this is certainly not the case with your friend. We know that these things can exist on many levels, but it would seem to me that very early on, you saw, as part of this relationship, something that moves into the amorous, or at least in his hope. So if you understand that, this is actually a question and I'd like you to just consider maybe beyond him, where you understand, you know, where you feel or it's declared that you are indeed playing this very special role, which is, I mean, truly an object of desire or a need, and supposing becomes then a life activity having to do with people and relationships, not just this exercise.

KELLY O'NEILL: Right, right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And this is what we're talking about, and I'm just curious how you manage that for yourself.

KELLY O'NEILL: Well, it's interesting because I mean now that I'm involved with an artist as well, I feel like I'm looking forward to being his model and having a different relationship because I see so many of these men who pose for, they do talk romantically about this relationship, artist/model relationship, and yet they don't have that particular relationship with their wives. Their wives are like ah, kind of poo-poo what their husbands do out of maybe—they don't necessarily poo-poo it, but they don't embrace it in the way that I think the men would like to see themselves, you know, mentor or just fine artist and the women can understand, the wives understand, this is a generalization, of course, what their husbands do and they distance themselves from it, not only by not posing for them, but by somehow taking some of the romance and the legitimacy out of it for themselves, like saying, "Oh, go ahead, honey, go into the room and do whatever you do with that woman," and having a little bit of a distance where I think the artist can go in and kind of transport himself into this kind of old-fashion idea of protector, like you're saying, and just—I guess there is a certain gift given to someone, the trust that it takes to get into a room and expose yourself. There's exposure on both sides.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well what about the idea of possession? Is that possibly sometimes part of it? Has that been your experience anyway where it's access, shall we say, that this—

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —especially in the private, not in class so much—

KELLY O'NEILL: Right, right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —but in the private.

KELLY O'NEILL: You know, I've just so far had to be self-possessed about it because any little suggestion made by these very dear men has just been so much not in my realm of idea. It's just like I cherish their friendship and I am so glad to be able to do what I get to do, but it's more about—I'm so much more conscious of keeping a little bit of distance than I am with some friends who I might have a bottle of wine with and get really silly with. There's just that little bit more that I have to keep with myself. Because I also realized when I first started doing this, I was going through a horrible breakup and realized that with all this time sitting up on a stand with no—not talking to anybody and not really having any focus other than a spot on the floor, I was going to really start thinking about how heartbroken I was and everything. But the fact was, what happened was, I was only able to be vulnerable in one way. I could only be naked. I couldn't be naked and crying in front of strangers. If I was going to be naked, that was it. So it was a very empowering situation by just exposing that vulnerable side of myself. All the other vulnerabilities were kept hidden.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This comes then pretty close to at least part of your motivation, why do you do this. I suppose making money is part of it. My sense is that if it didn't have other benefits or rewards for you personally, emotionally perhaps, I'm not sure, you probably wouldn't do it.

KELLY O'NEILL: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean you don't strike me as a strictly professional model, career model, that's for sure. What about that motivation? You mentioned vulnerability and empowerment at the same time. Can you explain that?

KELLY O'NEILL: Well, it has been so liberating for me in my personal life because I've had the range of body insecurities and everything, so it really is—any time you get naked in front of a lover, there is scrutiny that is inevitably going to affect you in an emotional way, where the scrutiny that you get on the stand is so much more pure. I mean no one's going to—you're never going to question whether or not they like you because you have big thighs.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

KELLY O'NEILL: You know, this is both throwing your vulnerabilities out there and then just having them okayed, like that's fine. My friend Jian, his English is not perfect and he doesn't know what cellulite is and that's great. And then Sam is so complimentary, and I can take that as, "Yes, I am a really good-looking bowl of fruit; I'm a fine-looking bowl of fruit" or I can take it as a woman that's just very sweet and very comforting and this is someone who has seen me with a microscope with no sexual agenda that I'm going to allow, so—

PAUL KARLSTROM: All right, no sexual agenda that you're going to allow, and that's the key, I think.

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And we've already dealt with this in terms of this questionnaire and this "Eros in the Studio" essay because it was very much focused, this essay. In no way—the theme, "Eros in the Studio," is no way to suggest that being an artist model is a sexual activity.

KELLY O'NEILL: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, so now we've dispatched that and we can say but we have chosen, in this case, to address that, to examine that. And in the case of this particular artist, and it sounds to me with Mr. Wang, that no matter how sweet it is, you know, love, sex, desire has a sweetness to it as well, that this moved away from strictly professional. This is not being a still life.

KELLY O'NEILL: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is not being a landscape on a model stand.

KELLY O'NEILL: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is being a person, a woman, and offering the possibility of satisfying certain needs.

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: With Sam, and I really don't want to talk about that specific situation too much, but to tell about—no, let's put this a different way. At what point did you realize that his modus [operandi] indeed is to find desirable women, attractive women, and somehow engage them to pose, and that indeed there was a fair portion of desire sort of wafting around the studio?

KELLY O'NEILL: Well, I mean I guess really from the onset when he approached me at my job. I just kind of always lumped all redhead fetishists in together just thinking that—I mean they've got some twisted idea of what we're about sexually or something. I mean there's got to be something more than just the visual contrast.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You sure look great.

KELLY O'NEILL: Well, it's just—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Maybe redheads . . .

KELLY O'NEILL: If he had approached me as like, you know, there was a fellow recently at an opening that said, "You are—have you been an artist model before?" just very cleanly and didn't—then we talked about paintings and other things, and he was probably in his early 80s and just very straightforward, no like, "Ooh, I like your hair color," any of that in there, so I got that feeling with Sam right off. I mean he's got a very warm and open nature and he doesn't hide the fact that he really—the figure's been drawn for, you know, who needs to do this anymore. You only do it because you love it and it gives you access to something you love. I don't think that there's really any reason to do more than a couple nudes in your painting career anymore. It's kind of boring to me, actually. I get kind of tired of seeing women's bodies so plastered all over everything anyway, and so there's not much new to be done with it; men or women's bodies, really. It doesn't matter.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you go into this situation knowing that part of it, part of that motivation, forgetting your motivation—

KELLY O'NEILL: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —in all this—

KELLY O'NEILL: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —for the moment, that part of his motivation, you don't know yet how much is desire—

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —is attraction—

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —that there's a physical attraction. To what extent does that remain okay if you're not attracted to him? In other words, to what extent do you say, "Okay, enjoy it"?

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I guess this is what I'm saying. "Have fun. I'm happy to be able to give this to you."

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that a little bit of it or how can it not be? Or do you just ignore that part and set it aside?

KELLY O'NEILL: Well, I guess there is a little of that. I mean I did go into this to get comfortable with myself and to feel like I could be regarded as beautiful as an object or a woman or as just something over there, not something that I was involved with, someone else who was scrutinizing me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

KELLY O'NEILL: I really wanted that kind of objective praise, you know, but that doesn't come without—I mean people aren't just saying, "You've got great elbows. Look at those elbows, the way they—." It's not that kind of thing, and especially not with the people I've dealt with. So there's a good bit of that that I probably still dismiss because I really hate the idea of causing their significant others grief in any way, shape, or form. If I'm providing something for them that they're not getting from their primary person—

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's trouble.

KELLY O'NEILL: That is.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Or well, maybe not.

KELLY O'NEILL: Maybe.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Maybe that sort of takes care of—shows them something and then it makes possible going on. We can't know that, of course.

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah, but that's, you know, that's weasley [sic] justification, not that you're suggesting that. If I were to try to like make myself feel better like I'm a marriage counselor of sorts, you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, surrogate.

KELLY O'NEILL: —that's craziness. I mean I did it to get over my body image issues. I did it for the money. I did it because it seemed like a fun thing to try and to be incorporated into the art community and to catch a little bit of immortality. It's a great gig. There's nothing really lewd about it, and if there is something lewd about it, it's on their side and I just kind of—I do kind of keep a blind eye to it. And when it steps over the line, it's uncomfortable. There's definitely a—that's when I pick up my guard again and just kind of laugh it off.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well without—have there been other—you didn't pose for a while until Sam rediscovered you. Is that right?

KELLY O'NEILL: Pretty much, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

KELLY O'NEILL: I'd come down here with the idea that I would eventually, once I found the proper venues and stuff, and then I'm still thinking I'll go back to Art Center and talk to—

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you like to do it?

KELLY O'NEILL: I do like to do it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: There's something about it.

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you think of yourself at all as an exhibitionist?

KELLY O'NEILL: So much depends. I do have to kind of take on a different personality for most of these, not so much the artist/model thing. I think that's a pretty natural thing just because I've been in front of people who I just see as kind of scientists. Whether they see me as something else, that's fine, but it is really in—

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you make the terms. In a way, you really establish the terms.

KELLY O'NEILL: In my head, and they don't know necessarily, but—

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see that, but—

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you will allow—there are parts that you will acknowledge pretty much set aside and this is about you.

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah, it is, most definitely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It really is about you.

KELLY O'NEILL: I am really curious. I do want to start posing for my romance here because I don't know how that will—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Wow! Yeah, I wonder have you ever posed for somebody —I guess you said you hadn't.

KELLY O'NEILL: No, not for someone I've been involved with.

PAUL KARLSTROM: A lover.

KELLY O'NEILL: No, but I've been so liberated in a lot of ways by this experience that I think in the comfort and security of a really good loving relationship, that as long as I can see the proofs before he does, I could do this.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is not about me, but I told you this in conversation, and very early on, in fact, before my wife Ann and I, well certainly before we were married, we were undergraduates, but I talked her into posing for me several times at Stanford. Like a Saturday afternoon, roommates weren't there and it was pretty thrilling.

KELLY O'NEILL: Was it photographs or paintings?

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, these are drawings.

KELLY O'NEILL: Drawings?

PAUL KARLSTROM: And I still have some.

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And then early on when she would come down, I had already then graduated. It was down in southern California starting U.C.L.A. She'd come and visit and we had some still—in fact, in my office, not at the archives, but at home—

KELLY O'NEILL: Okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —there's this really very, very detailed, every line which is interesting to me from the standpoint of what it shows about what that was about for me which is fixing an image, you know, sort of examining and lovingly getting all of it there. And then I also have taken lots of photographs of her—

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —but I think that is clearly something else and it's a different way to love.

KELLY O'NEILL: It is.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And I'm not suggesting that it's the same thing. But I also don't believe that these are mutually exclusive.

KELLY O'NEILL: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think this is—there's this overlap.

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah. I mean I guess the overlap that I haven't really experienced is starting off as someone's model and becoming their lover. I can see it coming from one, from—I don't think I could see it with obviously people I'm not attracted to—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

KELLY O'NEILL: —in that situation, so it's made it much easier to—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, it's not part of the job description.

KELLY O'NEILL: Oh, no, of course not. Thank you. Let's have that be really clear.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's talk about something very specific—

KELLY O'NEILL: Okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —that relates to this. You said over and over again that you've been very uncomfortable, that in no way would you want to be a cause for problems within a marriage, the artist's spouse or significant other, who is outside. When you're in the studio, it's you and the artist, and that's, of course, the way it's supposed to be, but especially if it's over time and maybe with a number of different models, of there's a whole history, as was the case with our friend, Sam, is the case, as a matter of fact. There is another component to the story, to this dynamic, often forgotten, and that is the, well the one who stays outside the studio and goes about her business, but aware of the fact. Now if there's a string of attractive, younger women coming into that studio, have you thought—well I think you have, but tell me your feelings about then recognizing that and sort of dealing with it.

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah. To think about it too closely, I mean really the only two women that I've had contact with who have been in this situation, they have had some issues in their life, whether they're insecure in the marriage or insecure about—I can see where if it were a husband-and-wife team and both painted and they both had models in and it was very respectable and the distance was kept—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sort of collegial, you know, they're colleagues.

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah. That would—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Engaged in the same activity.

KELLY O'NEILL: That would be much easier to deal with, that probably a bit of the defense mechanism is on the parts of the wives has been to really not think that much about it and kind of just dismiss it as their husband, the artist. That's what he does and that's—

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's his job.

KELLY O'NEILL: That's his job.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's his business.

KELLY O'NEILL: And not to think about it much more than that. I think you can get away with that for a really long time until certain things come up, like drawings that haven't been seen that are much more intimate than just—it's hard not to think about it. In the last few days, I was even kind of debating not doing this interview just because I started to feel like—well after talking to Pat [Clayberger, Sam's wife] on Friday [opening reception at Prufrock Gallery, Pasadena. Clayberger nudes and ceramics by Patricia Ferber], it was a very—it made me feel more responsible for—

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is a very responsible interview.

KELLY O'NEILL: It is, yes, I mean but—

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's the truth. I mean you're talking about examining, I think, some of your motives as well as telling the experiences of it.

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah. I mean it's just like you have to assume that there's going to be some of this in there. I've just never—I mean it's been very hard for me to come across to myself as a sexual being, period, in my life. I've always kind of just felt that—I know, I know it sounds very, very strange, but I have—

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm pretty gullible, but this one—

KELLY O'NEILL: No, I mean I tend to think of myself as the buddy in all my—as I grew up, I always had horrible crushes on—but I was always regarded as the buddy, so I still see myself as that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is posing a little bit then probably a way to sort of validate or declare that part of you, the part that you didn't, you know, when you were just the buddy and this wasn't part of it, do you think?

KELLY O'NEILL: Maybe. I mean as long as - [pause]

PAUL KARLSTROM: In other words, do you like the idea that, or at least allow the idea that these men in seeing you are possibly aroused? And I don't mean this in a vulgar, crude way.

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They are responding to you as a man, that you indeed are—

KELLY O'NEILL: Yeah. I mean it doesn't—like I was talking about a little earlier, I would be more inclined to feel the sexual motivation if I were dancing on a stage, clothed even.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]