Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Guy Dill, 2000 August 29

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Guy Dill on April29, 2000. The interview took place in Venice, California, and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

(TAPE ONE, SIDE A)

PAUL KARLSTROM: All right. Here we are after all of these false starts, we're ready to go. I'm sitting here with Guy Dill, the sculptor in his Venice, California studio, quite grand, quite commodious.

This is a first session for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. The date is August 29, 2000, and the interviewer for the Archives is Paul Karlstrom. I mentioned it's a first session, which suggests that there will be other sessions, which indeed I hope there will be. But this is a focused interview dealing with the subject of Artists and Models about which we've been talking for at least half an hour, probably more. Maybe we should have been recording, but we weren't, and now we're ready to go on [tape].

I should just mention that a few months ago you and your wife, Mary Ann, came out to the Huntington to have lunch, and as a result of that somehow we convinced you that your papers should come to the Archives, which is great, for which we thank you. But we were talking a bit about this particular subject, artists and models, and it's something that seems to have special meaning for you in your own experience, probably starting with art school. And so I'm pleased to have a chance to talk with you about this subject and perhaps, as we were discussing earlier, the special significance, the associations, perhaps, that this subject carries for you.

You went to Chouinard and I guess you finished there just before Chouinard moved, meaning became Cal Arts. Is that right?

GUY DILL: Hm-hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So this also -- there's a double opportunity here to have you reflect or remember a bit about your own experience then at the Chouinard, at that particular time. So why don't you tell just a little bit about yourself, your own background very briefly and especially then when you enrolled in art school, your own background in terms of schools and all, leading, of course, to that studio, to life drawing and then to our subject.

GUY DILL: To life drawing. That was -- I actually started going to Chouinard at night in 1966. I used to go to visit my brother there. I was in the Coast Guard at that time and Vietnam was in full swing and the Coast Guard was my opportunity not to go into combat. So I was on my last year of four years there, and I used to go and visit him in a -- it was life drawing class at night and I loved the environment. I loved the smell of oil paint and turpentine, and there was something very earthy about all of it, and there was always a live model there. And after coming in from being at sea for 30 days and driving into downtown Los Angeles the highlight was always to go in and visit my brother in class. Well, after the second time the instructor just said, "Well, if you're going to come in then you better bring a drawing pad."

PAUL KARLSTROM: And pay your fee.

GUY DILL: "And pay your fee, pay the model fee and get something out of it," which I did. And I had actually never drawn in my life and it was pretty interesting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You had never drawn before?

GUY DILL: No, I was not a drawer. I was not a drawer, it was not my station in the family to be a drawer. I was the sailor.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So that -- was that Laddie's . . .

GUY DILL: That was Laddie's domain. Laddie was the artist of the family, which I used to think, great man, I don't have to have anything to do with that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No pressure.

GUY DILL: No pressure. I can travel, see the world, have a great time. And it was about as romantic, I think, as things could get, but it was also an extension of how -- what my childhood was, because my mother had always

surrounded us with her friends who were writers, producers and actors, and it was kind of like getting back to normalcy after being exposed to the military for so long. And -- but on a level that made a lot of sense to me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Tell me, excuse me, but tell me again the year, this was '6 . . .

GUY DILL: '66.

PAUL KARLSTROM: '66. Okay.

GUY DILL: 1966. So when -- so I bumped into a teacher there, Stephan Von Huene. And he said -- he encouraged me, he said, "Why don't you put a portfolio together?" And I really had no direct interest in going to art school, but while I was there he must have seen something or decided that he'll use me to see if he can get somebody completely from left field to see if they have anything to do with being an artist. I had my own set of disciplinary rules which had been instilled in me and I was not in the context of being an art student, which I think interested him a lot. I wasn't looking to be an artist. So. . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: You didn't have any presumably pre-conceived, perhaps romantic notions of the artist's life.

GUY DILL: No, I didn't want to be an artist.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Bohemian ideas or anything like that?

GUY DILL: No, my lifestyle was -- I was mainly -- at the same time when I was the last year of the Coast Guard I was also serving on a -- I had a berth on a schooner, a 100 foot schooner and I'd gotten my captain's papers, and my plan was to start a company of charter schooners, which I later began before I got into school.

But Stephan had me get inside of a refrigerator box and draw through a peephole in this box. I would look at a live model and he wanted me to draw her from the inside out. And he said it's the only way I'll really experience how to draw flesh. So here I am on the inside of refrigerator carton he -- and we put a lightbulb in there so I could see and I'm looking out a peephole at a model and I'm trying to imagine what it's like being inside her body, drawing her from the inside. So, it was a sculptor's way of teaching drawing, 'cause Stephan was a sculptor.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It was about space.

GUY DILL: It was about space.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Interior, exterior, space.

GUY DILL: Exactly. It was all those academic things put into a context that was so curious to me, it was irresistibly curious. My entrance portfolio, the main part of it was the inside of a refrigerator box because I'd learn to really have a nice little environment. I had four walls surrounding me. I knew how to deal with them and eventually had to learn how to draw outside the box in another way, if you get my drift.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This, of course, is extremely interesting in a lot of ways, but one of the things that immediately comes to mind -- I've never heard of this before, so it interests me, of course. I wonder if this is unique to him, Von Huene.

GUY DILL: Well, I think it was. You know what he did, you remember he made curious little wind-operated or bellows-operated machines and I think he's always making boxes or containers of some kind. And now he had this subject who would cooperate with him on a huge scale. He did figurative work, so he was familiar with how that operated. I think we're all subjects of our teachers, and we're tools for their craft, and I was a willing participant because it didn't have anything to do with art as I had perceived it my entire life. It was being able to deal with the human figure in a really refreshing way. I had no fear.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is what -- the next thing that I wanted to ask you. You were in a sense isolated from the presence, the physical presence, or at least there was a barrier between you and the model, and did you think of that at the time? And how do you think about it now? Because there is a strong component of voyeurism in looking through that peephole at that model. She knew you were in -- well, she, he, whoever the model was, inside the box. Were you -- was it a class, were other students there?

GUY DILL: Yeah, there was about . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you were the only one inside the box?

GUY DILL: . . . 20 others. Yeah, I'm the only one in the box and I'm lucky enough to be in the box. I get to be in the box. And there was, of course, it was about looking out of the box and nobody being able to see me. It was

like pure voyeurism on the best level. However, your sexuality changes year by year and as you get older you become I think, more visual and less visceral and at that time it was not voyeurism to me. It was something else. It wasn't about being able to see the model and she couldn't see me. It was about being able to see the model and not being aware of other people looking at me looking at the model or them looking at the model. I had her all to myself. I had this -- I had the perfect specimen for me. So I'd move my box around the room. She could change poses and I'd just lift up my box and walk it over to another place. She never knew who was in the box.

PAUL KARLSTROM: She never knew?

GUY DILL: No. It was more fun. Eventually she said, "All right, who's in the box? Is it a boy or a girl, a man . . .? And I would -- "It was me," and it was perfectly fine with her. I really didn't draw males much. I avoided male classes. I wasn't that interested in the male form. I was most interested in the female form for all the obvious reasons.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You're not, by the way, unique in that -- I'll throw in an editorial observation here, this is also very often true of women in my experience, women artists, actually, so far in my conversations prefer the female model. Occasionally they want to be able to have the right to do a man, but in terms of what they enjoy, again -- I just throw that out. I don't know if it's anything that's useful or not.

GUY DILL: Female artists enjoy female models. Interesting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: At least the ones, most of them that I've talked with.

GUY DILL: Interesting. Hm-hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They think they're more beautiful.

GUY DILL: They are more beautiful, they are more beautiful. Oh, yeah, by -- yes, absolutely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What a -- that's really, we already have an interesting story on this tape, but I just, I can see it. I'm visualizing you in there. Was part of it also that since you felt different from the other students in the class a bit because you hadn't tracked that way? That you hadn't gone seeking -- you hadn't sought this out?

GUY DILL: You know, there was, Paul, but also at that time, there was a consciousness in the 60's, as you've -- as we all remember of being -- and so I could be -- it was like there was this kind of respect that other students had for me. I wasn't an art student, but then to be an art student had no cachet then. It had no social clout. It had no special meaning. It was just another craft. It was another trade and it was not -- what's the word I'm looking for? It wasn't trendy. It was way before that. It didn't seem to matter very much. It was a small world, especially art world in Los Angeles, which barely existed. And . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: It didn't have the cachet that it would now. My God, they're all over the place. "I'm an artist. I go to UCLA or Art Center or someplace" ... interesting.

GUY DILL: Exactly. And I was actually paying for this stuff when I finally got into school. I paid for it with a GI Bill, partially and the rest was lying to the Bank of America. Because it was an expensive school and staying in was hard and et cetera, but it was . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mentioned -- excuse me, I don't mean to interrupt. You mentioned earlier that you get reviewed every year, is that right?

GUY DILL: It was called screening. Every six months there was a freshman screening, sophomore screening, junior screening, to see if you were up to the level you should be, whether you could still remain in the school. It was -- what'd we have 350 visual artists and everyone there really wanted to be there and there was competition among all four from freshmen to seniors all the time, who was the heavy and it was a remarkably pure driven school.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm interested to hear you say that because there's a perception, even here in LA, but certainly sometimes from New York or the Bay Area even, that somehow there's a lack of seriousness here among -- in the art community, whatever that is, but certainly in the schools. I mean, in San Francisco they thought since they had the Art Institute or the California School of Fine Arts, that that was the only place. And I get the impression, not just from what you've said, but talking with others, that a lot of the students there were really serious about what they were doing. They viewed this as a serious business. Maybe part of that was a result of the GI Bill, the fact that you had it, in many cases, certainly at an earlier time post World War II, you know, these older guys coming out of the service, they didn't want to waste time. They wanted to get down to -- do you feel that was the case? You've described a fairly competitive, sounds like a serious situation?

GUY DILL: Yeah, it was total -- it was a very competitive atmosphere with one thing missing, and I thought the best thing about it was that this was missing, and that was what do you do after school? The object here was to be the best painter, the best drawer that was in the school without giving a thought to the idea of then what? Because you know you graduate from Chouinard, you go and sit in the patio until they ask you to leave. And it was -- what it meant was then it was not an ulterior motive to make art but the object was to make art. And it wasn't peppered and constantly put into a context of the bigger art world. It wasn't about that. It was personal achievement because the levels of -- or the styles were so diverse but it was all about how good you were at what you did, and it wasn't how clever you were. Cleverness was always part of it, I mean, art is a problem-solving enterprise and it always will be in my opinion, or for the kind of work I make, but for that it was beyond the clever stage. It's what kind of quality could you bring to . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was the moment that you really then became engaged? Obviously you made the decision to enroll and set aside your charter, not cruises, but the boat . . .

GUY DILL: Well, I did -- I completely . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: You made a choice?

GUY DILL: Yeah, well, not yet.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, not yet?

GUY DILL: What I did was, I worked with a couple of professors there and put together a portfolio. And it was bizarre to say the least. But it was real for me. It was who I was, how I was. I really couldn't draw academically worth a damn and that -- I'm still working on that. That's going to be a lifetime-kind of thing. Because I'll never be as good a drawer as some of the people I've seen. I mean, how can you draw like that and I know that it takes -- anyway, I put together a portfolio and then I left and I went back East. And I was invited to start a business after I'd sailed the East Coast on another schooner back there to fly to Australia and pick up an 85-foot yawl, sail it back to Barbados and start a company. I would get half interest in this boat and to start a company to begin a fleet in direct competition with the man who funded it so that he had a company to be in competition with.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He wanted this?

GUY DILL: He needed this, yeah, because he was the only charter company down there, and he wanted something to bounce off of, and it was an interesting business technique for him and charter boat . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: He was a good capitalist. I mean, he actually believes in market forces.

GUY DILL: Absolutely. If there weren't one, he'd make them. And I -- we went into dry dock and I kept in touch with him. And I went to Montreal and when I was in Montreal I was living in a house across from McGill University and I was doing some drawings. I was selling them for 25 bucks a piece, for which I thought was just amazing. There was a gallery who wanted my drawings. And for the most part they were very -- they were abstractions and charcoal on paper. And I got a call from -- somehow my mother -- oh, no I called my mother, I asked if I'd gotten any mail and she said, "Yeah, there's something here from Chouinard." And it was that I was accepted. They would provide money for the first year. They would make sure that I was funded for the rest of it, with whatever money I could help provide, but they would make sure that I had -- they were embracing me and so then I had to make a choice. And it was really -- it was a tough choice because I had a great opportunity for a business that I'd been engaged in preparing for years and another one that seemed very real and the realness of the students that I'd run into -- that they spoke the same language as I did on another level was just too seductive. The whole thing was sexy, seductive, interesting, humane . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Especially in the community perhaps.

GUY DILL: . . . normal -- a total community where I was a part of it. I absolutely spoke their language. They understood what I was talking about. And you go out to sea, there's not a lot of that going on. So I made my decision based on the fact that it was like an extended family and that's when I was Montreal.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So was Laddie at Chouinard at this time?

GUY DILL: Yeah, he'd been there for a couple of years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, that's right, because that's where you went to visit. But he was probably on the verge of being out.

GUY DILL: Um, let me see, he was about half way through I think.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you, growing up feeling competitive with Laddie, who's also by the way, for those who are uninformed and listening to this tape, Laddie John Dill is a sculptor.

GUY DILL: Painter.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, painter but does wall pieces too.

GUY DILL: Drawer, he's a draftsman. I mean, I'm sorry, isolated from me, you identify him. I can't resist. He's one of the best draftsmen I know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. But, you're very much in the -- the two of you enjoyed success in the same field and I realize this is a bit of a digression, but I'm curious to know, like even going back and growing up, was there a kind of competition between you or did you pretty much, do you feel that you were supportive of one another in whatever the endeavor was?

GUY DILL: I had no competition with Laddie. I always loved him. We were great friends growing up. We had no father figure in our life, so growing up with my mother it was a very close family, my sister, my brother and I. And we're still close. And other people have put competition in our way, and there was a period when there were these articles being -- on the South Coast, like an Orange County newspaper where this guy was actually trying to make up these stories where we were in competition, there was sibling rivalry. We undid him, we undid the guy, the sonofabitch. I mean, it was -- it just is so unfair to try to do that to people who love each other that much, and there was never -- he was -- he did what he did, and I do what I do, and it's coincidental that we're both artists. But we've shared studios, we've been in the same exhibitions together.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's good. That's good to hear. Had to ask the question.

GUY DILL: Oh, no, it had to be answered.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And now you see now it's not just a rejoinder to the Orange County Register or whatever, but to the -- it's in the Smithsonian. Sorry, I interrupted you, you've made a decision, now this is a key point, that you wanted to participate, rejoin this community that you had discovered at Chouinard and you left Montreal. Now, had you been going to classes at McGill; is that what you were saying?

GUY DILL: No, actually I was just traveling and living across the street very much in "hippie" lifestyle at that time. I was on the road. I just took off from the ship and I was going to travel until I figured out whether I got some mail from Chouinard. When the schooner got out of dry dock I was ready to sail back to Barbados, and then go to Australia to pick up the other ship. So I had some time on my hands, and I think there was a group of musicians and other people that lived in this Victorian house across from McGill University, Bonnie Prince Charlie was attending at the time. There was kind of feeling in Montreal then, it was just -- it was terrific. Very open, free, totally hip, yeah, it was a great period. And so what I did find out then I started hitchhiking home from Montreal, which took a couple of weeks to traverse Canada, east to west, very boring hitchhike. But I traveled with a girl who had -- she was a gifted piano player and we would catch rides with farmers who were taking something from point A to point B, which usually was about 100 miles. And they'd eventually offer to put us up for the evening and she'd play the piano for them. But she would only play Rachmaninoff, because she told me at the time, and I found out later, that she was correct, it's the hardest for -- it's something about being the most difficult composer to play on the piano, and so she decided she would spend her life mastering it. And she was wonderful. And that kind of got me in the mood as I was getting closer to Los Angeles and getting ready to move to downtown LA in a cold water flat and just I started school and didn't stop until I was done. So -- I did the four years in three years and I was as immersed as everyone else.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And life drawing, figure drawing was part of the curriculum. You said earlier that there really was an emphasis still at that time on drawing, and it was a regular part of the program and took a certain amount of time every week, or maybe every day. I don't know what the schedule was.

GUY DILL: It seems to me, I want to -- I was looking at my transcripts the other day because my son is at NYU and we got all our college stuff in the same file, and there was a life drawing class, a figurative painting class, there was some kind of class that dealt with the figure every semester of every year, and I remember a period of time in the first year where it was -- it felt like probably about five hours of figure drawing every day. It was a requirement there and it was -- I thought it was great because academically it's such a mystery to begin to draw the figure and you're so terrible at it. If, like me, you begin and you just haven't got a clue what goes on. It's really interesting to begin to learn it that way. I was in many ways the ideal student because I didn't have a lot of baggage. I just came in really raw. But I remember the figure was -- it was -- there's a weird combination of familiarity and sexuality and this electricity. Art school was sexually charged from the moment I started there at night. And I think it was shared with all the students. And it was not like a school of free love or anything. There was always inter-relationships how colleges are and so forth, and I hooked up pretty early in school with a girlfriend and I stayed with her throughout. But it was still the most highly charged sexual period of any college

life I could possibly imagine because you're surrounded by the naked form all the time in one way or another, whether it was pictorially in art history or whether it was in a life drawing class or painting class or -- but, of course, in the 60's then too, it was really easy to shed your clothes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

GUY DILL: So it was not unusual just to be with friends and not be dressed. That was not unusual. There was -- the campus that was the interim campus, which I didn't go to, I stayed at the Grandview Campus when Chouinard became Cal Arts, was the Villa Cabrini. It was a convent in Burbank, I believe, or right near there, and they had a pool and what they didn't figure was with art students if you have swimming pool it equals nudity.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

GUY DILL: It was a great campus.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you didn't go to that one?

GUY DILL: No, I didn't. I just visited my girlfriend out there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: She was out there?

GUY DILL: She -- yeah . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: She was at Chouinard also?

GUY DILL: She was at Chouinard as well, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I didn't know about that other campus. I have to look at Perine's book because it'll talk about that I'm sure. What about -- we're starting to touch on some of the interesting, more interesting aspects of this subject. One of the things that interests me is the different way this phenomenon may be viewed by men and women. And I guess we have to say at this point, heterosexual men and woman, boys and girls. Because you've described an environment that is awash... I don't want to exaggerate it, but that's the term I'm thinking of. But there's very much an eroticized ambiance.

GUY DILL: Hm-hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In a lot of different ways, not just the nudity, but then that becomes, I guess, an emblem or symbol for it. Men and women sharing their experience. What was your sense of how the girls, female students responded to this situation? How they viewed it? Do you have any way to know, did you ever talk with your girlfriend about that?

GUY DILL: Yeah, well, you know, it was my whole freshman year I didn't have -- I was not monogamous but it was -- I had a girlfriend from the Fashion Department who would come in and very -- usually you dated girls from the Fashion Department because they had money and you would be sure to eat. The art students never had money. And I -- all the girls -- say you're in a class where some girls are completely seemingly very straight, but it was very relaxed because when you were all in there in the same -- and in the first 20 minutes of the first day of class with the model there is this wonderful kind of tension and that was always great. I always looked forward to that. But that quickly disappeared and it would always depend on the model. Because we'd have models of every form, the enormous woman who was just flesh everywhere and then the super skinny one. And then there was Liz, and I remembered Liz because she got involved with one of the students there. And it was always a lot of fun to draw Liz because you could imagine her, she was more naked then anyone else because -- are you getting tape?

[TAPE ONE, SIDE B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, continuing this Artists and Models interview with Guy Dill. This is session one, tape one, now side B. And this is very interesting for me. I suppose it appeals to the voyeur in me to share with you this art school experience back in the 60's and all these fabulous girls and nude models and so forth and, of course, it was the 60's. Boy, lucky you, couldn't have been better, right?

GUY DILL: Lucky me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were talking about the models. I guess you were saying that the first part, I don't know if you said 20 minutes or whatever of the first life drawing session of the season had this kind of charge, this tension that eventually, of course, went away, dissipated. But you were talking about the different models. But I'm interested that you remember Liz, and I want to know why you remember Liz, because there are a lot of models but I've noticed that some models seemed to be remembered more than others.

GUY DILL: Well, yeah, there was -- to this day in Venice, I see a girl that was like she was, the super tall model, she was 6 foot 2. I see her around, she was only remarkable because she was tall. But Liz was remarkable because Liz seemed naked. And I think it had to do with the fact that she, number one, had a really extraordinarily sexy body. She didn't have the typical model's body. She had not huge breasts, but just, you know, they were large enough to be remarkable and she was fit but she was real voluptuous at the same time. It seemed like when she took her clothes off it was like everybody, men -- girls and boys, men and women, all the students would stop. It was amazing to watch her just take off her robe. And then the fact that she was dating one of my friends at school at that time. So I would see her at somebody's house or we'd get together or something and see her and there she was always clothed and proper and then come into class and there's Liz. I mean, it was, there were people that would crowd the hallways and draw Liz when she was modeling and she was also extraordinarily pretty. But there were -- she was one of those models, one of a handful, maybe three models in my whole career of art school that looked undressed and it was -- I thought about that a lot, I thought what is that? Why is someone more naked than someone else? And it's just about what they exude. It's not a body type. It's just what they exude. It's something other than a physical trait.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about this, and it really doesn't have a lot to do with saying, well, certainly they are the agent of this, but it has to do with desire that they arouse, if their very being can serve that way, it -- in other words, it's a projection possibly for them, it's a response [to being looked at].

GUY DILL: Well, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What do you think? I mean, is that possible?

GUY DILL: Yeah, except for the fact that I never wanted to have sex with her. She didn't really turn me on in a physical way. It was more of a remarkable phenomenon. She was just so sexy and she turned me on in a particular way. I mean like as -- how can I differentiate? She was not my type sexually. I had no -- but she was this, sort of this generic sexual type where she engendered certain kinds of feelings, a kind of excitement, but it was more of a mental excitement than a physical excitement.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's sort of what I mean. It's like being emblematic. It's like standing for sex.

GUY DILL: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not that that individual -- How is that? Does that work?

GUY DILL: Right, emblematic, that's good. She was emblematic.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is she still around?

GUY DILL: I'm sure she -- I haven't -- I don't know where she'd be right now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You don't see her at parties?

GUY DILL: No, no, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Too bad, okay.

GUY DILL: She -- different circles, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you remember any other models? Because you know some of them are pretty interesting people in their own right. They've gone on to do other things and so forth and . . .

GUY DILL: You know, unfortunately I don't have a great memory, but a lot of my models after that were my girlfriends in that first year.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is not an unusual pattern.

GUY DILL: No, it's not.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean at art school? The models that you've -- at art school became . . .

GUY DILL: I draw all my friends. I would draw my girlfriends, you know, and I'd draw -- somebody would say, ask somebody's friend, "Would you model for us?" And then we'd be at someone's studio and it would be kind of spontaneous but some of the best figure drawing I'll ever do or -- is in the heat of sexuality and I'll stop and draw and it's amazing what it is.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Have you ever read -- this is very interesting -- have you ever read the book by Mary Gordon

called *Spending*? This is a reverse of this, but this is a female artist and a male boyfriend model.

GUY DILL: I heard about this book.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's pretty interesting. You got to -- you need to read it.

GUY DILL: I'll read it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm going to probably cite it in this chapter I'm doing on artists and models because it's the flip side. So much is the male as they call it, gaze, the sexual -- well, not just object, but bringing in the sexual [aspect of] looking at the model, but it's very seldom that you hear about this in almost any form reversed. But -- so what you've described is interesting and to the point. What preceded what? No, go ahead.

GUY DILL: Before -- I didn't want to forget it but you mentioned something about the way it's a flip side, it's a female perceiving male. And Linda Benglis used to live next door to me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah, I've met her.

GUY DILL: And she had that kind of thing about her where men were to her what women are to men in a kind of -- in a good way but it was in a dominant kind of way and we were really -- we were pretty close for a while but it's not my nature to be in that role so it didn't work for us. But it was interesting how she would play it out because she would want to draw me or she would want -- and she had her motives for it, which were a kind of . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sexual object.

GUY DILL: Sexual object, yeah, exactly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which is an okay thing.

GUY DILL: It's an okay thing, it's perfectly fine.

PAUL KARLSTROM: As long as you don't just limit it to that. I met Linda actually -- of course, I know her, she's famous from the old days, especially that Artforum.

GUY DILL: Yeah, the stuff with Robert Morris and those announcements she made.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, the dildo thing. It's incredible, the strap on. I met her -- she was quite changed-- at Peter Alexander's studio a few years ago. She just dropped in. I was sitting here interviewing Peter and… a most interesting woman. But I am very interested in what you say about her reversing the gaze, as they call it because I don't think that's -- at least so far I haven't found that to be typical to just completely reverse it. It tends to sometimes, it seems, take different forms where sexuality is involved, where it's eroticized. And so Linda was one though, in your experience, who simply turned the tables.

GUY DILL: She simply turned the tables, yeah. And it was entertaining initially, and then if that is your way of being then it works, but if it's not, then it isn't. It just doesn't.

PAUL KARLSTROM: If you don't like to be an object and if it doesn't turn you on then . . .

GUY DILL: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: If you're in a relationship. Where you -- did you have a relationship?

GUY DILL: Not really a relationship. We had a really good friendship.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Friendship.

GUY DILL: A really good friendship.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So she would ask her male friends to pose even though it wasn't necessarily leading to the sexual thing?

GUY DILL: Yeah, which is a very male thing. It entertained the hell out of her and it entertained her in a way that I think that males can relate to. It's like a pure entertaining knowledge.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean just looking, it's fun to look.

GUY DILL: Yeah, it's fun to look. And there is no qualifying that, it just is.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, but it didn't necessarily -- it did not have to lead to sex.

GUY DILL: No, because in that sense it was very female.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, that's what I'm thinking. Seems to me there's a bit of a difference. Most of my investigations on this topic indicate that men no matter what they say -- no, scratch the words "no matter what they say." They actually say or acknowledge that there's always the possibility.

GUY DILL: It's always there, right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of getting laid.

GUY DILL: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And there are fancier ways to say that but they -- in other words, that it's gonna lead somewhere. And I've actually interviewed a number of -- no, no, no -- some photographers, women photographers and painters, and there's a kind of a difference in this male to female. Big subject, we won't get into it right here, we can talk about it some other time. And so I'm interested in how one person, Linda Benglis, fits into this. Seems to be somewhat of a, in general, separation between men and women on this. You know, let's get back to you. You became interested in, recapping -- in drawing the figure as a challenge. I mean . . .

GUY DILL: Yeah, because I couldn't draw the figure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because you couldn't. But then there's these wonderful fringe benefits. And what I would like you to explain more to me is how it became, in your experience then, connected with relationships, with girlfriends, but also unavoidably with sex itself. That it wasn't a distance exercise at all, it was serious business. Drawing, nonetheless, seems to me, from what you said that it attaches itself to desire, the sexual desire in some cases.

GUY DILL: To be stimulated with a subject not just in the present, in the present tense. I could really turned on to a landscape and be drawing it at that time. There's -- it's as important as being stimulated by a model or a particular pose and that stimulation translates into the work. It actually affects the work because you begin to do things with all your switches off. You don't have any cognizant activity going on while you're making this picture, while you're putting this picture together. It's everything as good as you are happening while you're getting this impulse. You got this information coming in and you're doing -- you're only as good as you are, but that's how good you are. And oftentimes you're better than you thought you were, and that's when it gets really exciting, because great stimulation offers a lot of surprises, because you go past what you think you were. How good you thought you were. If we were constantly evaluating how good we are, how can I put that into -- how can I make that present without being -- having any self-conscious activity involved in that? How can I make that thing live without my print on it? Yet, it's all about my print, but I can go right past that.

And a good -- and a great model can do that. A great pose can put you into a kind of state where the lines are coming out and it just goes beyond the thinking. It is not a conscious effort. It's a spontaneous. But it's beyond -- it's not -- spontaneous makes it sound as though it's not disciplined. It's a highly disciplined act that is -- you're in a flow. When I'm building sculpture and I'm composing it and I'm doing it right, when I'm really on it, it's like a rocket burn. I've got that much fuel and it could last for a month, or it could last for a week, but I can pick it up every day and carry on with it. And the benefit of a great pose or a great model is that it gets the rocket fuel going. It gets -- it brings you to this point of using everything you've ever learned about it, everything you don't know about it, which you suspect you might know about it is coming through and you're behaving as an artist. And the model has -- I think the greatest advantage of a model in art school, is because it's the most primal method of stimulation to get that art motor moving. And when you're an art student you're not aware of that, you're just unconsciously turned on and you won't have a professor that tells you that. They won't tip you off.

So, later being conscious of it, it's a little more difficult to draw because there is this fear of failure. You have good days and bad days with it. And you're too cognizant of the act. So it says then that art is this thing that happens as a result of us constructing ourselves as this tool…

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hm-hmm.

GUY DILL: As this very capable kind of tool. And it's used best when ‘we're out of the country.’ [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: That was eloquently put, that was pretty good. It seems to me that in part it's getting beyond calculations, somehow being moved to a place where you aren't calculating about marks and lines and so forth. That it somehow carries you along and that as you were saying, the model, the right model, the right pose, can do this. It seems to me also that the right relationship can do this or -- and this is what I want to ask you about the -- the difference that having, perhaps, even a complicated connection, erotic, but beyond that, with an

individual maybe brings to having her pose. Does it tap into your own experience and into your life in a way that can further, let's say supercharge that engine you're talking about?

GUY DILL: You know, I've used it to clarify, to simplify a relationship. If I can just get down in line certain things that are -- they're the ones that come at me. I try to put the things down that have been coming at me and see if I can bend that to paper somehow. It helps clarify how I -- it clarifies a relationship to some degree. How does it do that? It at least gives me some points of reference because I can say, here, right? And then she says, "This is how you see me." And then I say,"No. That's just then for that moment, that's what you were." And I can hand her her again, and she goes, "Well, that's me." Meaning as you can't see that, I can see that, you can't see that, it's not familiar to you. So then I can set myself up. I can strengthen my relationship or I can alter. I can actually bring a little more, bring another facet to it. I can bring: if you can draw someone. Okay? And if you can show that to them and it's completely familiar to them and they recognize that person, then that means you see each other the same way. Okay? And then when you present that same person with something that is completely unfamiliar to them, you're saying to them, "There's something about you that you don't understand," and they then see you as having the ability to look past what you see about yourself and they -- you're actually better in the relationship. It's not a game to get better, but it means that you have the ability to expand their vision of who they are. I'm not putting that well, but . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, no, no, I think it's very, very interesting because you're talking more now about a relationship then an art exercise no matter how important that may be. Putting marks down, and it seems to me that the key here is understanding another person and then another person being willing to allow that there are parts that they themselves don't see clearly, or don't understand. It's a conversation about who we are. That's little bit in the psychological sense, but what about that, does that ...

GUY DILL: I kind of see it as the life that -- you live a life from me. I sit here and I think about drawing you, okay? I think about drawing your face. I can draw my guys really well. And I do once in awhile. And I think about the life that you are for me here. And the life in our relationship and it's interconnected because you have a certain way of projecting yourself that comes through and I'm curious what part of that projection is coming through on to there that is forcing me to do that. But you also live a different life that you don't know about that I know about. That we all, outside of ourselves, we're not aware -- we don't know this and so you live a life that I know about you that you don't know, which I find really interesting because when I'm drawing somebody that doesn't know me very well, or he's not familiar with that. Like when I would draw younger girls, well, you know, 20-year-old girls and I was 26 or 27, and I would look at them and I'd draw their eyes. I mean, it was really great to watch how they would go through three, four, five different changes of who they are. That uncomfortable quality was great and all I'm really doing is looking to see the shape that -- how that eyelash . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: But they think you're looking into the windows of the soul?

GUY DILL: Yeah, right. I'm just trying to find out how that line works. And watch them go through that. Now, while I'm doing that, I'm getting a real good look at who they are too because they're just flipping around all over the place and as they change in their own personal dials, they're showing you who they are.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It seems to me that, most interestingly, this is a lot about understanding people or getting to know them or getting them to reveal themselves, or maybe that's inevitable in this process as you've described it, which is pretty important stuff, and it does go beyond just art-making. Let's say it's a fringe benefit if you will. What about -- you've had a history of -- for some reason you like to draw the people who are important to you in your life whether they're girlfriends or as you were telling me, Mary Ann, your wife, at least in the past, you say that it's not always an easy thing to do because -- we'll save that perhaps. But it's unavoidable in talking with you about this, that it gets into the individual, actually pretty deeply or at least how the individual is revealed or reveals herself. I don't want to say more because I'm obviously thinking . . .

GUY DILL: Well, okay then I should -- my notion on that if I think about why I say it that way is because there is no line drawn. There is no separate discipline. [Robert] Irwin always struggled with that until he wrote a book about it. He said seeing as forgetting the name of the thing one sees and it's really that, that's a good way to put it because there's -- I don't know which is more important, which is necessary, which needs what. But it seems like there's a bundling there and that you can't undo it. It doesn't come apart. It doesn't separate. One isn't making art and one is having the relationship when you're working with a model. It is tied up into just another facet of what the relationship is. I think it gets -- it's so hyper-personal.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hm-hmm.

GUY DILL: Now I'm a little out of water here because I should have started -- there's a figure drawing class that I'm supposed to be going to on Tuesdays and I haven't done it yet because I'm a little -- I'm a little worried about it. I haven't drawn from . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Today's Tuesday.

GUY DILL: Yeah, I know, well, maybe tonight's the night.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, after this conversation how could it not be.

GUY DILL: Yeah, absolutely. And I want to see what that's like because I really only draw who I know or what I -- I'm getting that next level of information from. I get turned on from just putting my shapes together. That's where I get my kicks because I can point out any number of relationships in a simple piece right here that turns me on.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

GUY DILL: To the point where I gotta draw it. Then I've got to photograph it. Then I want to make more of it. It's an overlapping excitement. So, the figure is just a -- this is just an extension of the figure or the figure's an extension of this, or it's that thing that lights that fire. I don't know where one stops and the other begins.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is complicated stuff.

GUY DILL: This is complicated.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is very, very interesting though, and provocative.

GUY DILL: I'm going to excuse myself for just a second.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

After a brief pause here we are again. Lots of interesting ideas sort of floating around. But what I would like to do now -- we've been talking about -- in ways that I'm not going to try to summarize, though, the importance of the individual to you in drawing. That there is something special that comes apparently with say, whether it's a friend, a girlfriend, somebody that plays a role in your life too, then to have her as a model, to draw here. I'm going to go back right now to what we talked about at lunch when you said to me that you find it difficult to draw your wife of -- how many years?

GUY DILL: 25 years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Here this, of course, is the big relationship and I'm sure this has changed, taken different forms over the years, but can you explain that to me?

GUY DILL: Well, there's a lot of ways of explain it to you. One thing that happened early in our marriage is that I was able to draw her figure but never was I able to successfully include her face. And I at first, and I still to some degree think this, but there's something else going on. She is made of -- you've met Mary Ann, you know she has extremely fine features. That if they are not put together in such a way as they are on her face, they don't look right. And as a matter of doing that even slightly incorrectly, it not only not -- not only doesn't look like her, it looks unattractive as far as how beautiful those parts should look together. Okay, her eyes are -- well, I'm not going to go into describing her. So I thought that maybe it's that I don't understand how to combine those elements on that level when I can draw her -- everything about her in essence. And I've done a lot of drawings that she doesn't know about because I stopped showing her drawings of herself a long time ago. For the reasons that we just were discussing about showing someone. So she doesn't recognize who that is. And the longer you're married I think that you recognize parts about someone, which may be part fantasy, part reality.

I don't really have a big desire to draw her except that I wish I could to get by it. And I think it might be just to impress her. Well, I can draw you. But now it's even more impressive to me the fact that I can't draw her because she knows that I can draw likenesses and the likeness part of making art is such a -- has always seemed such a silly part of art. That's recording and I think my introduction to art was never about recording. It was never about mimicking. It was never about representing something. And it's why I'm a sculptor for the most part because I make things that are, not things that are alluding to be or are depictions of something. I like the thing itself. However, the gestures that she makes -- she's been drawn by different people and they do it okay, but I don't recognize -- I see what they're talking about in there, but I don't see that as her highest form. I think I have such esteem for her that I can't do her justice. Maybe I just can't do her justice because she's one of the finest people I'll ever know and she's certainly one of the most different from me that I'll ever know. I'm attracted to my opposites in women-- Sagittarius, I'm Gemini.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Many of us are.

GUY DILL: Yeah. They keep us on track. And it's -- so that might -- it occurs to me that might be one of the issues is that I cannot do -- I cannot -- I can't portray her the way I think she should be portrayed. [John Singer] Sargent could do it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Maybe. It depends. I mean, if you're in love. I think this really moves into an arena that few of us -- if we're lucky we've been there, but to understand it is very difficult. But what it seems to me that you're talking now about is portraying an idea, not the appearance of something, and that gets real interesting because that's what art at the highest level is supposed to be about. Not just imitating, representing, but somehow bringing the idea, the essence, and in this case this is your feelings towards her.

GUY DILL: That's very true. Because I thought about, okay, I can't do it two-dimensionally. So why don't I do a bust and see how I do with that, but that's trivializing her.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Reducing to one.

GUY DILL: To putting her into an image of who she is when she portrays who she is on a level that . . .

[Recording Stops]

END OF INTERVIEW

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