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*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Susan Benay,  
2000 November 30

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Susan Benay on November 30, 2000. The interview took place in San Marino, CA, and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

Tape 1, side A

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, an interview with Susan Benay on November 30 of the year 2000. This is part of the artists and models series. Our distinguished artists and models series. This will be one session focusing on that subject. The interviewer for the Archives is Paul Karlstrom and the interview is being conducted in my office in the Scott Building at the Huntington Library, the West Coast Regional Center for the Archives. All right, Susan, we have an hour to talk about an interesting slice of your life, I suppose is the way I would introduce the topic. You are an artist yourself now and we'll talk a little bit about that. You can tell me a bit about that. But there was one period, a period in the 60s, I believe, when you also were a professional model. And before we talk about that I'd like to know a little bit about you, where you were born, did you grow up in California or did you come [here] later? What was the track that took you then -- or brought you -- eventually to California and to posing? What's your story?

SUSAN BENAY: Thank you, Paul, for welcoming me into this event. I was born right here in Los Angeles, California and actually was raised right here in your backyard in Pasadena. So these are my cultural roots in this area, which I feel very fortunate since California didn't have a strong history they were sort of very wide open to any sort of experimentation. I went through schools here and then eventually ended up taking some courses right here at PCC [Pasadena City College] and some special things at Cal Tech because I was sort of a math person too. And we'll get into it later. I also was with Jirayr Zorthian, the first life model at Cal Tech years later. Anyway, and then I went to some art schools including I took some courses at the Pasadena Art Museum when it was on the old Los Roblos. I went to Chouinard. I picked up courses at Cal Arts. I picked up courses at UCLA in the cinematic arts and some courses at Goodman Theater in Chicago, as well as auditing some courses at the London School of Film Techniques. So my interest and culture in arts was very broad at that time, as well as studying musical instruments. I studied with Ravi Shankar. I was very interested in North Indian classical music.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So where was that? Was he here then?

SUSAN BENAY: Yeah, he was at Cal Arts, [that] is actually where I took his course. He was over there. And that first year when they were still at Villa Cabrini.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was the first year? Remind me.

SUSAN BENAY: I think it was, was it '71 or . . . It seemed to always be there but it was a very interesting and experimental venue because Villa Cabrini was a Catholic girls' school and it wasn't quite so structured at that time. Anyway, so I had really immersed myself in really serious study of the arts.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In a broader sense though, I see that you weren't just taking a typical course in studio art or in painting or anything like that.

SUSAN BENAY: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It was much broader.

SUSAN BENAY: Well, that's what I was going to sort of bridge into. Then I met my friend Camille Feinberg, who you also have interviewed, when I was 18. And she was the one that actually opened the door to my modeling, because we met at art school at PCC. And this was a tremendous thing because it was a way to earn money, but also I worked for, I swear, I must have worked for every artist in every school in Southern California. I did it for seven years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Seven years.

SUSAN BENAY: Simultaneous to my education. And it supplemented my education. I thought it was the greatest thing in the world that I could interact with all these great creative entities as well as just sort of be, have this total pose of receptivity to everything they were imparting in the way of knowledge and creative experience to their students, as well as working one-on-one with some of the artists we'll talk about later. So that and a

scholarship I put myself through art school. And then went on to do art and have been very involved in the cultural communities. I was an arts, a cultural arts, commissioner in two cities simultaneously in the Palm Springs area.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When was that?

SUSAN BENAY: This was like five, for five years in the city of La Quinta and did a TV show. I started a TV show, "Cultural Connection" on the arts there and was an arts writer. And [I] have had many exhibitions. I was a gallery owner for many years and explored a lot of creative alternative venues with that. And tried to give open forum to other artists as well as myself.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where was your gallery?

SUSAN BENAY: Well, I had one up north when I lived up there. And then I had a big 3,000 square foot one here in Palm Desert, California.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where was the one up north?

SUSAN BENAY: The one up north was in Southern Oregon.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, way up north.

SUSAN BENAY: Yeah. I was one of those people that sort of packed it up in the '60s and . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sounds sort of like a hippie.

SUSAN BENAY: No, not a hippie. No, no, no. I was into consciousness. So I went out into the woods . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, okay. Not a hippie but an explorer.

SUSAN BENAY: Right. And part of my intention around that was I felt that I had such a vast and incredibly scholarly enriched cultural arts education that I wanted to see who I was as an artist, as independent of everything I'd learned. So I went up there to sort of have a letting go of this incredible education that I'd had access to, and to see who I was, independent from everything that I'd learned. Which I had learned a lot in, you know, classical, renaissance art and so forth. I was a concept artist originally and did a lot of pieces just out and about. And let's see, I worked in concert with other artists that we'll talk about later. And that's a good enough bio. I'm [live by] by the ocean now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's very good. It's intriguing also. It raises, of course, dozens of questions. I have to decide which ones to pursue to keep those . . . The impression I get is that, and you said as much, that you really were on what they call a kind of quest to self-discovery, to finding yourself, who you really are, I think is what you said. And that that could be done, I gather, only to a certain degree or a certain extent through any of the disciplines that you had engaged. These bodies of knowledge were, you felt, insufficient in and of themselves to help you get where you wanted to go. Is that right?

SUSAN BENAY: Yeah. I was always interested in the inner truth of creative process. I don't mean to use a cliché. And also the healing aspect. I did a lot of creative process. I set up an art program at the Betty Ford Center for women in crisis, with emotionally disturbed children, and emotionally handicapped, and battered women and so forth. But apart from the healing I was always interested in the inner truth and chose isolation, cultural isolation when I was up north, but paradoxically when I was down here and immersed in all these, this wonderful cornucopia of opportunity, I had to access when I was modeling, doing things like that. That in itself also was a form of isolation because I'd have to be very still and very quiet and would go within to sort of divine if you will the inner truth of not only what was happening there and the larger creative questions, but also what was happening within myself, the creatively and what was awakening in me. So there was, I guess, I would describe as like a field of stillness that I was dipping into when I was modeling. That doesn't mean to say I wasn't talking and having a good time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

SUSAN BENAY: And, you know, having a glass of wine with Richard Diebenkorn or getting nuts with Jirayr Zorthian.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Certainly not talking a lot, I'll bet, with Diebenkorn.

SUSAN BENAY: No, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, let me ask you that. I don't want to take you off your track here, but I knew Dick a bit in

the sixties, probably about the same time, meeting him when he was at UCLA.

SUSAN BENAY: Late sixties, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Probably about '65, I think that's when he came to UCLA.

SUSAN BENAY: Well, Paul, you pre-date me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I admit it. I admit it. But he never struck me as a terribly communicative person. He was quite [inaudible] and spoke slowly. And I guess if you, we're going to want to talk more about that, and I suppose it was in the Ocean Park studio, but he didn't all of a sudden become voluble and chatty, did he?

SUSAN BENAY: No. No, he wasn't. But there was sort of an ambient atmosphere there that was, it was, I don't know, it was a very rich atmosphere visually. There was a lot going on. And so even though there wasn't spoken words, I mean, my experience with him he was quite stoic and focused with his own creative process. But just the nature of the environment it had this, I don't want to say ebullience exactly, but [William] Theo Brown was there and there'd be a little talking, levity, and like I said, there was the bottle of wine, so it definitely had a bohemian aura about it. And it had a richness that enlivened it. So it wasn't like a dull experience. But, like I said, he wasn't very talkative. But he was very . . . sort of the intensity of focus on his work. But maybe my sensibility or perception, being an artist myself, that excited me. I didn't have to hear him talking a lot. You know, the fact that he was so engaged with his process, so immersed in it, that was like a form of language that really excited me with him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's interesting. Yeah, that's interesting. And, of course, you would be equipped to understand that, to sort of empathize. Maybe to almost put yourself in his position as he was working, because it was a familiar activity.

SUSAN BENAY: Yeah, it was like we were dreaming together.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because you've done life drawings so you knew what it was about. And you knew what an artist looks for in the model and . . .

SUSAN BENAY: Yeah. In fact, I would consider that one of my greatest strengths, why I was very popular as a model, because of my background of doing art. I would visualize, when I would take a pose I would visualize what it was I was looking for. So I would energize my poses with sort of like an organic tone or a classical tone or whatever I felt was appropriate to the situation. And also because I was an artist it linked me to the teachers and the other artists in a very unique way, that maybe if I had just been only an artist/model I would have had a whole different take on it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, that's interesting.

SUSAN BENAY: But I don't know. There's a -- in that book the Diebenkorn book -- there's a drawing of me before the drawing of Camille. I think [you] showed her the one, or she showed you . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, yeah. She found herself in . . . I don't know where that book is.

SUSAN BENAY: It's very contemplative, [involved] in a process in his space.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you identified with and in a sense participate in his process, in his practices?

SUSAN BENAY: Now with Diebenkorn I didn't, I intellectually participated, but I didn't like overtly, like outwardly, like in terms of communicating, participate a lot. Like sometimes with other creative experiences, like with Jirayr Zorthian, or Richard Feynman, or some of these other people I worked for, I'd be dialoging with them. And I'd be like sort of a co-creation, more than just being an object. With Richard Diebenkorn I wasn't, you know, there'd be a little bit. I mean, he might say, well, you know, "Are you comfortable with . . . What pose do you want?" I was able to input in that way. But not a lot of outward input that would change the direction that this, you know, the work was going that he was engaged in. You know, other than my very existence. He'd respond to my shapes and my colors. And he liked very much because I had red hair.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah, yeah. They like that.

SUSAN BENAY: Very Titian colors and stuff. And I had like a little bit fuller form. And I remember that was one of the things he actually appreciated.

PAUL KARLSTROM: There were a lot of skinny models then?

SUSAN BENAY: Well, in the Twiggy days, you know, to get that sort of affirmation and he did talk about, he sort

of relished the simplicity and beauty of my forms. And sort of that, it was like a certain visual continuity that you get. There weren't like angles. And so, yeah. I had forgotten about that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So kind of counter to the, at least the fashion ideal of the time. Sort of a mini-skirt era. I guess a little before that. But do you know Eve Babitz? She's a writer and she was, I don't want to get off this story about Eve, but she actually is that nude playing chess with Marcel Duchamp in the Pasadena Art Museum. And I think that was in '73. I interviewed her recently. She wasn't a model beyond that, although she was part of the art scene. The reason I'm mentioning this is she made a point, she's really full figured, and she said that she absolutely couldn't stand all those skinny ones. And one of the reasons she was happy she did this[nude chess photo], it was like making a statement about the more ample woman.

SUSAN BENAY: Yeah, like the deification of this ample, one of the things that I experienced in this sort of artists/models arena was indeed giving that affirmation of like, when I had my clothes on I didn't fit into that model look. But when I took my clothes off it's like in the art world it was like that was considered the ultimate beauty. Because I had this very classical form. And it was . . . It created a whole arena for myself. That I could experience myself in very sensual and positive ways, that I couldn't when I was outside of that venue, when I was one the street, you know, trying to fit into some like little boxy thing. I won't ever say I tried to put a Jackie Onassis pill hat on, but that was something that really supported me in really connecting with who I was, you know, and blossoming in those directions. That was well as the interactions with the creative community and the artists and stuff. I mean, it was quite amazing to, you know, it was like a little oasis that I was able to discover myself in.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Were you, what was your . . . this question of self-image comes [up]. I've done quite a few of these interviews recently. And invariably that comes up at some point. That the posing, nude posing, I suppose any kind, but especially nude, contributed to this process of -- one term that's used is self-discovery. But helped in dealing with body image. The idea of one's body. And gave a kind of self, coming to terms with one's self and deriving a kind of self-confidence that to a degree was carried into the regular clothed world. Did you find that, I gather that in your case it didn't carry . . . ?

SUSAN BENAY: I think it was more than just sort of a conceptual realm of, that you were just alluding to. For me it wasn't just about self-image. Although that was part of it. You know, getting that permissiveness, the freedoms to explore them. But for me it was more connecting with these like inherent intense energies that sort of transcended self-image. Just to like have an opportunity to connect with those energies. Because at that age I was like very charged and didn't know which directions to go. And the regular traditional world, I hate to use such mundane terminologies, but there really wasn't avenue to explore any of that. So, I mean, when I entered in this world of artists/models I was sort of like very contained. And it wasn't just like I was philosophically limited. But it was also like my energy was all blocked. Because I found no safe or supportive place in traditional society, certainly not from -- I came from a conservative family. My father was a prominent lawyer. We lived, you know, we had a mansion up here in Altadena and very conservative friends of his . . . You know, it was like all these Republicans and Republican celebrities and stuff. And, in fact, just as a footnote, I had gotten a couple of drawings from Diebenkorn and a couple of from John Altoon, just sketches, and I didn't want my father to know that I was modeling nude.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, no.

SUSAN BENAY: And I hid them. I hid them so well. And they ended up getting just sort of shredded. And I think I finally had to get them out of my room when I went to study in Europe. And now, like 30 years later, I . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: And now they're gone.

SUSAN BENAY: I know. It's like I had Richard Diebenkorn drawings.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Uh-oh.

SUSAN BENAY: But, anyway, that's just an aside, a peripheral thing. But coming out of that sort of very conservative background, and very lofty, you know, very intelligent background from my family. All of a sudden I could step out of the mind, you know, and into this totality of being this like, like all these things, all these energies, these feelings and, you know, it wasn't like a cerebral thing only but it was just like connecting in all these really cool ways. And my receptors would go out and connecting. The best connections were like with the artists. And the other art students. And the creative community. And so it was like, it was really charged, so it was more like, rather than getting away from a mental image it was connecting with like these powerful energies in myself that . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, would you describe it in terms of a kind of integration of body and mind? And I don't want to get too fancy with you.

SUSAN BENAY: Yeah. Yeah, thank you.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because you had been operating, from what you've described, in a, I gather a fairly, certainly a well-educated and perhaps fairly intellectual ambiance.

SUSAN BENAY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And with, but with some real limitations and restrictions about body expression. And maybe even views of the body. And maybe nudity.

SUSAN BENAY: Right. And emotions and all the other things. And, of course, that was part of the big attraction when this door sort of flew open, you know, with the arts, the modeling, as well as creating art, was suddenly I could. I could experience all those things and connect with them, and explore them, manifest them. And it, yeah, it was. It was an integrating process.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which you, I gather, it's a process that you've continued? You've pursued beyond that.

SUSAN BENAY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But, again, from what you've said, it sounds to me as if this really pointed the way, this experience.

SUSAN BENAY: It opened, it opened the way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. Opened the possibility.

SUSAN BENAY: Because then it became a land of infinite horizons. And I could go every direction. And I often joke, it was sort of like these signs of realities that were going on. It was like I'd be happening on all different levels. And one of the other things that I really appreciated, because I have this great sense of the absurd, is the humor, you know, that you find in the creative community. That was also a fusing element that helped integrate things. So it was like opening to all this, you know, these inner like rivers, I don't want to over use a metaphor, but these rivers of, rivers of energy and creativity and connecting. So it was like invigorating. It was fun. It was expanding. A lot of times it was intellectually challenging. And all sorts of other side things. Learning social skills. Learning to assert myself for who I was. That's part of the things too, this modeling deal, was it was getting a sense of who I was as separate as to who I'd been brought up to be.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

SUSAN BENAY: And sort of putting that out there. And, of course, fortunately in the creative community with these artists and stuff, they're very receptive and very interested and very supportive. And they're not sort of slapping you down. It's like they want to experience. Like I can give an example. Because I know we're talking about different artists. When I worked for Jirayr Zorthian, who was like my first artist. I'm sure he would say I was his model. But he did give me away as a birthday gift one year to a friend of his. In Malibu. But when I worked for him, how this deal happened with him, which . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, how did you hook up with him?

SUSAN BENAY: Okay. I met, how did I meet him? I was in Altadena. I only lived about a mile from him. And . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Who posed first, Camille or you?

SUSAN BENAY: No, I did.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You did? And then you introduced . . .

SUSAN BENAY: I met him at a soirée or maybe it was when I was at Cal Tech or something. Because I'd hang out there a lot because I majored in art but I minored in theoretical physics. And so I was like, I, well, you know, if you go deep enough into physics and stuff it becomes like an art form. It becomes so beautiful. So beautiful.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you'll have to tell about that when you get to Feynman.

SUSAN BENAY: Feynman. Richard Feynman. So, anyway, I met Jirayr, god, where did I meet him? Well, it will come to me. But, anyway, I was always very excited about my experiences. I had done a happening in Chicago and I was recounting that happening to him, and how we weren't, which is, you don't want to control all the specifics of how a happening proceeds, just by definition. And how it got really nuts. And it was like done at a Serbian monastery and things weren't in control and people went crazy. And I told him all the details of what had happened. He became so ignited about it. And I guess there was a real sensual underlining to it that he invited

me . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean in the way you told it?

SUSAN BENAY: Yeah, I must have told it that way, but he took it that way. That was a co-creation. And I think he put more of a sensual slant or erotic slant on it than I originally thought I was expressing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: We're not surprised.

SUSAN BENAY: That doesn't surprise us about Jirayr, but he invited me up to model. Which was like a mile up the road, which I worked for him for several months. And he did a couple, he did a major piece on me that took a long time with multiple poses. But, anyway, I would, part of the dynamic there is I would feed these stories to him about what was happening. And then he would incorporate them into the picture. Like if you look at the picture, I think it's called, what was it called 67 Love-In?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Love 67.

SUSAN BENAY: Or something. And it had, I told him about the story about the anteater named Knuckles and that it was at the Serbian monastery so that was in it. And all these different pieces were in it. But then he sort of overlaid like, he had these erotic templates that he would overlay. So I'd be telling him about my experiences while he was drawing, very factitious and he'd always be telling me erotic stories. And I would try to be like, you know, sort of stopping him because he was getting into some pretty explicit areas. I mean, I was like 18 and it was, I did live in Haight Ashbury for awhile so I don't know what to say. So the atmosphere of the studio was, it was very charged. But it was charged in two ways. It was one sort of like there was this fire from these erotic stories, but there was also this counter-fire to like my resistance to these stories. And things would happen, like, it's a part of history I suppose, can I say something like, well, I don't want to say anything that would hurt, you know . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, you can say whatever you want. As a matter of fact, I mean, use your judgment but . . .

SUSAN BENAY: Okay, this was my first job, first modeling job and Jirayr would like really, you know, he'd really get going, and I'd look over and he had like dropped his pants.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I've heard that story with other . . .

SUSAN BENAY: And I'd go, "Jirayr, put it away. What are you doing?" So there was this energy. I mean, here I was like an 18 year old girl and I was just awakening to my sensuality, which sensuality is real integral to the arts.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

SUSAN BENAY: To visual art, to all the arts. So it was like I was resisting, he was firing in, and so it's like the two things would sort of, you know, like go against each other and sort of synthesize into like another really charged form of energy that I think affected both of us. Because he was then like really getting into the work and . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it was really productive?

SUSAN BENAY: My resistance, he was putting out, and that my resistance was igniting him sort of like a Bacchanalian thing. And then he would get more intense about his work. And get more sexually explicit in his work. And he was putting more actually than I was like doing. And then, but then I also would like, I'd be thinking about these things and then I would carry it home. And then I would go home and do like erotic drawings. But not with him as the subject. But it was that energy. And it wasn't just . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you did these through imagination when you did these drawings?

SUSAN BENAY: Yeah, it was just like the feeling, the intensity. So it was sort of, it was the combination of what he was putting that energy out, I was resisting, but somewhere in between . . .

Tape 1, Side B

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, continuing this very interesting interview with Susan Benay. We're talking about our mutual friend, Jirayr Zorthian, whose papers are in the Archives of American Art, and whom I interviewed at some length with too many glasses of wine usually. And just for the point of interest for the record, after this taping we are going to go up, along with Camille Feinberg to, on up the mountain to this very place, this venue, and visit, have an evening with the Zorthians. So this seems to be pretty nicely . . .

SUSAN BENAY: Dovetails together, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Anyway, so this is Tape 1, Side B, the concluding side of our tape for today. And why don't you . . .

SUSAN BENAY: Well, I just wanted to add as a footnote, just as a footnote, like I didn't have the perception, maybe because I was so young, but it was really [not] an erotic drawing [to me]. Although it was certainly sensual.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean the one that you did?

SUSAN BENAY: The one that he did of me. And as I talk about, you know, we sort of synthesized this new form of energy that we both took to our own creative corners. But later that drawing ended up being in an art, an eroticism show on La Cienega.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What? David Stuart [Gallery] or some place?

SUSAN BENAY: I can't remember. We went to the opening. John Altoon, I don't know, all our cronies were all down there with work. And it was sort of controversial and I sort of was really shocked. Because I just hadn't thought of it in that context. Of course, Jirayr was very much older than myself. And I was more in this idealistic mood. But, yeah, so anyway, so I went on for about three months with Jirayr and then he was an interesting, I don't know if nexus is the right word, but he connected me with some other interesting people. He was sort of the joint link. He introduced me to Richard Feynman.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, we're really interested to hear about that.

SUSAN BENAY: Yeah. Well, I just, honestly with Dick I wished I had been old enough to really know, you know, who I was really talking to. And I did some modeling for him. And we, I was, as I said before, I was the first artist/model at Cal Tech. Jirayr was doing a class and Dick came in and did some work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So who hired you?

SUSAN BENAY: Jirayr.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, so he hired you? You had posed for him privately?

SUSAN BENAY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And then he brought you into the course?

SUSAN BENAY: Yeah. Because by then, later, I was working all around, you know, both colleges, art schools, you name it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: '67 that must have been? 1967?

SUSAN BENAY: Well, let's see, yeah, it would have been . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because that's the name of that painting.

SUSAN BENAY: Yeah. I guess so. If we can trust Jirayr. We'll talk about that on another tape.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

SUSAN BENAY: But anyway, the -- yeah, '67, '68, '69. Like I said, I modeled for seven years. But this period was the late sixties. And so I met Dick Feynman. He came in, I hadn't, Jirayr, I had met him at a couple of parties. I used to be at these parties of Jirayr's all the time. Of course, I was one of his, you know, luminous ornaments.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, sure.

SUSAN BENAY: He liked to have his beautiful women, especially if they were intelligent.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, he still does.

SUSAN BENAY: [laughs] But Dick Feynman used to be up there all the time. A lot of interesting people. And so I got to know Dick fairly well. But he came in this one time to this class. And then did some drawing. And I think we went to one of the coffee houses, are they coffee houses on the campus there. But we were drinking. I believe I was under age with these two gentlemen. And then the two of them took me to my first topless and bottomless bar on Lake.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, that's famous because Feynman used to go there like every week. Like Toulouse-

Lautrec or something.

SUSAN BENAY: You know, and I'm going, "What is this?" It's like . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you were 18?

SUSAN BENAY: Yeah, I believe I was 19 by then. I likely was under age. And I was sort of, I was trying to discuss theoretical physics with Feynman in there. And we would have napkins and we were drawing. And we were drawing nudes and talking about physics and juxtaposing all these, you know, the world of science and the world of art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, they were big on that, those two.

SUSAN BENAY: Yeah, those two. But I also was participating actively because I really challenged Dick on a couple of things.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, really?

SUSAN BENAY: About the ultimate nature of aesthetics and so forth.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were 18 or 19 and you were . . .?

SUSAN BENAY: Yeah. I was like a whiz. I was like a whiz.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I guess.

SUSAN BENAY: I could go there with whoever, wherever their head wanted to go I could go.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How was he like though? I mean, did he, he was pretty, it seemed to me from what I've heard, pretty relaxed guy, pretty convivial and social.

SUSAN BENAY: Yeah, he was real energized.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And he enjoyed these . . .

SUSAN BENAY: He was like a mind, but he also, you know, he played the bongos. You know, my, some of my strongest memories about Dick are a little bit different than maybe some other people's. One of the things I, this isn't an art thing, other than, he was so creative himself. Up at Jirayr's he used to, these soirées he used to, Dick did, he used to get Jirayr's children and he'd put them like on his knee, and he'd like tell them these stories, these creative, animated stories that were so exciting. I would like leave the adults to like go listen to these stories. Bedtime stories, I guess. And it was like, interestingly enough those are some of my strongest impressions because I was so struck by that. You know, apart from everything he said he had this brilliant creative mind and this, almost like this cosmic love for these children that he would manifest. He just was really amazing. And he also did art. He did a couple of drawings. I didn't work for him really extensively at that time because I think I hopped over to Europe again. But he was very serious, you know, when he would draw. His work was very contained. But as a personality he was like liquid energy. It's just, and so clear. So clear, with incredible sense of humor.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you find this attractive? Did you find it sexy?

SUSAN BENAY: Well, I, what I found sexy about Mr. Feynman was that I was always seduced by people's minds. If they had a brilliant, luminous mind, creative and bright, and really, really intelligent they could go into those realms of like pure thought and pure ideas, this was really sexual to me. But, yeah, the, yeah, I was, sensually I was more connected to Richard Feynman's mind. His work, his actual art work wasn't like a real sensual expression of who he was. I mean, that wasn't like the linkage in that way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hm-hmm. Yeah.

SUSAN BENAY: But Dick was really -- Dick was great. I knew Dick very well. Everybody did. He was on the scene. He was on the scene. Everyone was on the scene. Pasadena was sort of like underrated at that time. There was a lot going on. We were doing some very experimental interesting things here at the Pasadena Art Museum. I was working for some interesting artists, Paul Sarkisian, David Bungay [phon. sp.], John Altoon. And, of course, they were all, there were these subgroups that we knew, like Robert Irwin and all these people that, I guess they sort of, they were like a generation before myself and Camille. But they all sort of like hung out and cross-pollinated. So there was like this whole energy. And so as models we'd connect and get on the circuit and work for the different ones. But there was a lot going on. Like the old Pasadena Art Museum, a little bit with the new Pasadena Art Museum, but it wasn't quite the same. The old one was, it seemed more experimental, more open

to, like anything could happen there. You look like you have a specific question, Paul?

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, I'm just reflecting on all these things. You found yourself then really very early on, it seems, meeting a lot of these people, actually becoming through your modeling activity, part of the art world.

SUSAN BENAY: Yeah. I was very fortunate. I really was.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So this presumably facilitated, I would think, a kind of almost -- let's see -- transfer of residence, of where you lived. I don't mean that literally, but figuratively. You really moved from one world to another. Were you still living at home at the beginning of that period or did you move to . . . ?

SUSAN BENAY: Well, in the beginning I told you I had to hide those drawings. Oh, god.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So how long did you live at home then?

SUSAN BENAY: And then I moved, I lived, let's see, I moved into a studio, I was on the scene and I lived in a storefront on Temple Street [downtown Los Angeles] with a sculptor. And there was a very cool scene going on there. Very alternative. And we were doing some very interesting things way ahead of time, like in the sixties, you know, renting billboards and painting them. And we were sort of getting around like the traditional gallery and institutional art scenes, museums, and having shows in our studios. And I think we were covered in a couple of art magazines. We were like the Temple Street Artists.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

SUSAN BENAY: Yeah. It was like a happening scene. It was a happening scene. There was a whole group. We were all in storefronts. And that ended when we had the '71 earthquake. That brought a lot of our buildings down.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

SUSAN BENAY: And it just abruptly ended. But that was a cool scene. I mean, there was like the art critic from the LA Times. I mean, everybody, movie stars, everybody was coming down. I had this studio space or storefront, 3,000 square feet, and we had art classes there. You know, we'd hire models ourselves, this sculptor and myself. But everybody, I'd be cooking dinner for 40 or 50 people two or three times a week.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Wow.

SUSAN BENAY: It was like a scene. We were going from studio to studio. So then I lived, Camille and I, we got a place in Mount Washington, which was a [Sam] Clayberger world. And by then I was at Otis.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's where you met Sam?

SUSAN BENAY: I think I had worked for him before. I don't know. Honestly, I believe I worked for like everyone. I mean, everyone.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You must have been busy.

SUSAN BENAY: I was busy. I was working sometimes up to three jobs a day. Which they were three hour gigs, as well as going to art school. And at the time I wouldn't have said it, but now in retrospect I was like one of the top three or four models in LA. And I think part of that was because since I was an artist I would bring that sensibility of perception, you know, that inner knowing, that cool take on what poses to do, and that willing, and being an artist, willing to experiment and do all sorts of outrageous things. I was fun. I was bright. And I was into it, and part of that scene. So it was like you said, I sort of took up new residence in this art scene of LA. Which wasn't acknowledged by the East Coast or nationally at that time, but I would characterize myself as being integral to the fabric of that whole deal that was going on here in the sixties and early seventies, both as model and artist.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, both. And I think that that's what would make that possible because finally, I think finally, I would imagine finally you get the respect of artist as operating on the same level, if you are also an artist. And I think . . .

SUSAN BENAY: Plus you got to have a sense of humor.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

SUSAN BENAY: You've got to be fun.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And being just a model I would think, I'm not sure of this, but it -- even though the artists

liked the models and can enjoy them that if models are not also, not also having experience of art practice, as they say -- it's not a full connection.

SUSAN BENAY: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In other words, I'm describing you as someone who had both bases covered. Maybe making it more interesting.

SUSAN BENAY: Plus, you know what part of the thing was too was the willingness, I really believe this, to like explore new territory, new definitions, new realms. Because artists are very creative as a community. And with their models they don't want a model that's just going to be rigid in a chair, the same old pose. They want models that have some energy and life force to them, even if you take a still static pose. Or if you're willing to go into some of these more experimental realms. It could be something like with David Bungay where I would be on top of a ladder reading, at the Pasadena Art Museum while I was posing nude, reading avant garde poetry while there was a pile of junk underneath me. And then moving around, and so I was inputting into how everything was taking shape there. I wasn't just the object. So some artists like it. And whether it was in the central realm, like being open to those type of energies. And I'm not talking about having physical sex with them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, right.

SUSAN BENAY: But open to that sort of sensual energy. Or receptive to any number of things, to be a model and sort of basically wanting to travel wherever the artists' heads go, wanting to go there. Unless I didn't want to go there. You know, like when say Jirayr dropped his pants. I didn't want to go there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: One can see how that wouldn't contribute to this process.

SUSAN BENAY: But it was part, you know, it's part of the history, it's part of what happened. And who knows what that catalyzed to happen in the next five minutes and what that moment of him doing that, my rejecting it, and him going on and what he put into his work, what I put into my work that night, you know, and so forth. And so it's like I don't want to sort of invalidate any event that happened, even if outwardly it seemed like rejecting or non-receptive. But that was like the cool thing was just to like wherever these artists want to go. So I worked for, I mean, I worked for all these great artists and had all these, I'm in museums all over the place, but had all these great experiences. I have a lot of personal history with these people.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Can you think of any works that you ended up in that might be known? You know, like, well, certainly the drawings [inaudible] in the Diebenkorn.

SUSAN BENAY: Richard Diebenkorn, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm just wondering, what about like say, Sarkisian or . . .

SUSAN BENAY: Paul Sarkisian, he did drawings. He didn't do a major painting of me. Although I think he did [one] of Camille.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah?

SUSAN BENAY: I think, I think he did. But I'm just trying to think. But I don't know. At a certain point he left the scene and as much as I'm involved, you see, I like to be at ground zero, like on the scene happening. I'm not product-oriented with art. I like to be in the process. So I don't have like a scholarly relationship with all the names and people and what they did. Like Camille, she's much more savvy in that area. Like she knows everybody's name, what they've done and so forth. You know, I have seen pictures of myself, I mean, just even, Jirayr's not so prominent, but like there I was on the Internet. I had my legs open. Hello.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hello. In fact, you're still there. You're there right now on his web page. And, of course, you're not identified.

SUSAN BENAY: And John Altoon he did quite a few, he did works of me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Tell me about Altoon. Let's talk about a few of these people because it's a way to maybe bring up some experiences and sort of characterize the different kinds of experiences with these people. Altoon is really interesting. I mean, Camille talked about those sessions and also some with Feynman in a way that certainly described more desire presence or if you want to call it playful lust or something, than with, certainly a Diebenkorn, a very different kind of experience.

SUSAN BENAY: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And I'm not saying that, you know, this is not like a judgment that this is right or wrong, but

it's interesting to see, try to figure out the different ways they operated, other than the obvious. Which is, here's an attractive young woman, well, she's here in the studio. So what about that? What about Altoon for instance?

SUSAN BENAY: Well, my experience, okay, if we were to bring it specifically to John Altoon, I was going to say sometimes it's, you know, you can have one relationship with him socially, but I sort of looked to what comes out in the work as what really went on.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

SUSAN BENAY: John Altoon he was, he was a very interesting person. He was like always nice and had a bit of a sense of humor. A lot of intensity but like I worked for him, for instance, at the Pasadena Art Museum, and he would be going around talking to the students and whatever and he'd be looking at me and he'd always have this, well, you'd have to know Altoon. Did you know Altoon?

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, no.

SUSAN BENAY: You'd have to know him to know this look. Was he Armenian? He had this certain look. You know, just on the edge, just on the edge. And he'd be looking and he'd be looking, and at that point he was the teacher, right, the instructor. And then all of a sudden he'd like stop and he'd like sit down, and he'd like go into this like fever. And he'd like start passionately like drawing page after page after page. And it was so intense, you know, he'd be like looking at me. But I didn't even feel like I could take a break. And it's like my legs would be asleep, everything would be asleep or hurting. But it was like I was so engaged by the intensity of whatever he was responding to, this inner fire in himself. And I'd look at his drawings and they'd have, sometimes they'd just be a few lines, but with such like definition of like fire or passion. You know, just like maybe two lines, sort of like he cut away all the extraneous. Like Matisse talks about taking everything out. You can say it all with a couple of lines. And that's the way he was. And it would have an erotic element to it. And everything would dissolve. He wouldn't be dealing with the students. He wouldn't be, you know, he didn't say, "Oh, did you want to take a break?"

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

SUSAN BENAY: He was so absorbed in it and so intense. So that sort of moment is how I would define what went on with him rather than anything he said. Even though I'd see him on the scene and he'd be fun and, you know, bring that which he brought. But nothing compares to when he committed pencil to paper or charcoal or whatever he was using. Nothing compares to that. For really experiencing him that was it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's interesting. I mean, it's certainly his line has this amazing vibration and energy. We have, I don't know if Camille mentioned this or if I told her, but we have this really big collection of his mostly erotic drawings and sketches. And they go on and on and on and they're obsessive in the extreme. It would be fabulous to . . .

SUSAN BENAY: He never missed doing the pubic hair that's for sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And they're also funny. I mean, some of them are actually funny. They're a lot like Picasso where he puts himself, you get the feeling that he's really putting himself, he's critiquing himself in a way that is almost making fun of himself or pointing out the absurdity of his own situation he portrays himself with the models. And the point of this, I guess it's a kind of question, is that you get the sense that he is in a way the creature of the models, of these women who are these objects, if you will, in his work, the models and this relationship which the creativity is sparked, as you suggest by that. But I think it's . . .

SUSAN BENAY: It's like a raging current. And you know the thing that was curious about him, I really, I was just flashing on it when you were talking was you felt with him that he was not only like the witness objectively on the outside doing the drawing, you know, like looking at it. But in his drawings it had the outside information that he was capturing, but also you could feel like the inner throb of like your own, I mean, it was almost like shocked. I mean, my modesty was shocked. Like he was inside of me. Like the throb of my sensuality. Like he was like the blood coursing up that. You know, I mean, this doesn't, I don't know how this relates but it's just an image I get. It was almost like I was his phallus and he was the blood rising up in it. So he was both on the outside doing it, but he was like on the inside. Very different than most artists.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's just fascinating.

SUSAN BENAY: He didn't have that coolness like Diebenkorn did. It was like he was, it's like he became integral, like he became me. Or I became him for that moment. Like I said, when he was like doing this, a couple of these sessions, I couldn't even move. I was like transfixed.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what I was asking you and it may be wrong, and we can't get into this too much, but in

looking at those drawings and other things I've seen of Altoon, I get the sense that there is, what he's portraying is also kind of his own obsession, and being to a certain extent, in control of the obsession, that he actually isn't in control. And so in a way I think of that in terms of, if there's a power dynamic in the studio, which I think there is, certainly sometimes, that Altoon was aware that his own desire made him in a sense weak. Not necessarily strong. Because it was overwhelming to him.

SUSAN BENAY: I think the power intensity did create a real feeling, he always felt vulnerable. I don't want to say like a little puppy, but, and of course, there was that history where he just sort of lost it, like climbing the telephone pole or some of these episodes that he had. But I don't want to use the word obsession, but there was such a magnificent intensity about his relationship with like this central or erotic throb, even though it didn't necessarily have to be like a vagina, but you could feel it in his image. And it did, it sort of rendered him, there was a certain vulnerability, I would say vulnerability rather than weakness. But he served it. He was not the master. That was my take on it. He was not the master.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think that's what I was trying to say. To me that communicates in the . . .

SUSAN BENAY: But the powerful part was he was willing to surrender to it. And I think that's why his work is so engaging. Like you can't look away from it. It looks, I mean, some people might go, "It just looks so simple." But if you really, it just so involves you. It's just so compelling. So he would like surrender to it. But it was like it was, but it wasn't him in isolation. It was like, I felt like at least in my experience it was like the co-creation. You know, it's like he tuned in to something in me, ignited something. I didn't have to physically do anything. But he'd ignite it. It was almost like sub-atomic physics going on. And then he'd like, he'd pull it out like a raging river and commit it to paper. He was very interesting. He was different than most artists. Very different.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is what I gather.

SUSAN BENAY: Yeah, very different.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Camille's account is kind of along these same lines. Who else stands out as particularly memorable in these terms in your experience? Probably not so much artists for whose classes you posed I wouldn't expect, but I would imagine it's more of the private sessions that these kinds of things that were . . . Anybody else that you remember particularly? I know Altoon and Diebenkorn, of course. How could one not remember that. Jirayr. And then you said Sarkisian.

SUSAN BENAY: Oh, yeah, I just worked for his classes with him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So that wasn't a particularly, a singular kind of . . .

SUSAN BENAY: Not with Paul, not with myself, no. The -- god, it's been so many years. The, you know, there was one artist. I can't, you know, I just can't think of his name. He was a comic, a well-known comic book artist. I'll save that for another time to tell you more about that because there were some incredible things that happened with that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You didn't know Llyn Foulkes by any chance? He was, he probably wasn't around that particular scene. He was in Pasadena, Altadena at one time, but I'm not sure of the time so it doesn't matter.

SUSAN BENAY: Did you know Charles White?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. Did you pose for him?

SUSAN BENAY: Oh, yeah, I did a lot of private sessions with him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah? We have his papers in the Archives.

SUSAN BENAY: Oh. Is he still alive?

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, he died quite a few years ago.

SUSAN BENAY: Yeah, well, I've been out of the loop, I guess, in that context. I did a lot of work for him. He was like, I would say he was, well, if he had a couple of margaritas at lunch he was in love with me. He was madly in love with me. And that was an intense, very intense central relationship. I mean, we didn't have sex but it was like very . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were connected?

SUSAN BENAY: Yeah. It was like he just couldn't, he just couldn't get enough of, it was almost like, his work was almost like an adoration and/or like a sexual act that he did on me. Even though it was very contained and so

forth.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, how did you feel about that? I mean, it's, well, I gather from what you've said it's something that you, that brought to the experience a kind of energy, a positive experience for you, even though I supposed, if it was too obsessive it could be rather overwhelming, if it was tantamount to like a sexual act.

SUSAN BENAY: Hm-hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did it matter how you felt about the artist? I would think quite a bit.

SUSAN BENAY: Hm-hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And therefore that supposes a kind of relationship of some sort. You know, a connection.

SUSAN BENAY: Yeah. I responded, yeah, it did matter a lot because later as I got further into it I could pick and choose who I work for. And I would work for artists that interested me personally more than so-called famous. Like it didn't matter to me whether they were well-known or not, you know, what I wanted to experience. But for me it was very important that there was something in them that interested me or inspired me.

[End of Interview]

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