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*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Emerson Woelffer,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Emerson Woelffer on March 26, 1999. The interview was conducted at Emerson Woelffer's home in Los Angeles, California by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

EW: EMERSON WOELFFER

PK: PAUL J. KARLSTROM

PK: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. An interview with distinguished painter, Emerson Woelffer in his home in the Mount Washington area of Los Angeles, where he has been since, I do believe, 1961, having come to this area in 1960. Is that right?

EW: Right.

PK: And this is a first session interview, Tape 1, Side A. The date is March 26, 1999. And the interviewer for the Archives is Paul Karlstrom. Emerson, this is great, because we've talked about doing this and then it just hasn't happened. And finally we're sitting here starting what I hope will be a series of several interviews. Today what I would like to talk about though is really your experience as a teacher, your teaching experience. And then, of course, before that as a student. I'm particularly interested, of course, in California and what you found here.

EW: Teaching before I came here.

PK: No, no. That's okay too, because that will lay in some of your background. But why don't you just start with perhaps your own schooling, your own educational background? Your own training in art?

EW: I began at the Art Institute of Chicago. And you had to take the required courses from the beginning, which was design and figure drawing. And after a year of that you studied advertising art or painting. And I took painting. I had a course called Drawing, Painting and Illustration. And you had to take the illustration, but I wasn't interested in that. My main interest was just in painting, drawing from the figure.

PK: Emerson, excuse me, but how did you find yourself going to art school? How did this come about?

EW: I always wanted to do . . .

PK: Did you grow up in Chicago?

EW: I grew up in Chicago and I didn't have any money to go to art school. But I got at a job selling ice cream at the World's Fair in 1933, good salary, saved enough money to go to art school. And when the World's Fair was over I went to the Art Institute and I had a friend there named Arthur Osver, a dear friend of mine, and painter in St. Louis. And he got me a job as a janitor. Most of the good artists worked there at 6:00 in the morning sweeping the floors, cleaning the place up. And they got free tuition. And that's how that started. So we drew every morning from the model. And Borris Andersfell, well, our teacher would come in and go up to each stool. And in relation to where you sat, the lower ones were for the people in the front row. Then there's intermediate schools after that. There were drawing stools that the board sets on, were the halfway. And then students in the back row had the tallest ones. And Mr. Andersfell had set the model up in the morning like on a Monday and he would come in on Friday and start up in the front. And you'd hear charcoal snapping, he'd be correcting the student's drawing. The bulb's in the wrong place or this and that. And then he'd move to the next student. And he'd snap the charcoal and was pushing so hard to draw on top of your drawing. And he did that every Friday. And every afternoon then after lunch we'd go to the painting room and he'd be at the head of the painting department.

PK: So he was the main . . . he was it?

EW: There were two of them.

PK: Two faculty.

EW: Borris Andersfell and Louis Ritman. And I studied with Mr. Ritman in the evening classes before I started day school. And everyone said, "Don't study with Ritman. Study with Borris Andersfell." So I went to Borris, all of his students got the fellowships. And Mr. Ritman saw me in the hall one day and said, "What are you doing in his class?" So I studied with Borris Andersfell. It was painting from the model.

PK: Were you able to do that almost right away? Or did you have to go through a long series . . . ?

EW: Well, I had to go through a foundation course first of drawing and design. The design teacher used to say to me, "Woelffer, you design like a designer but you paint like a . . ." Oh, no, no, excuse me.

PK: You paint like a designer?

EW: No. Turn it off a minute. Or . . .

PK: That's okay. We can come back to that.

EW: He said, "Design like a designer but executed like an easel painter."

PK: That's what you were supposed to do?

EW: No. He liked my designing but I didn't execute art in this way. I painted like a painting.

PK: Did they expect, in the school there, the artist school, that most of their students would actually go into a commercial area?

EW: No. There was a divided . . .

PK: But everybody had to take a little bit of both?

EW: Everybody took a little of both. But after the second year, then you just specialized.

PK: So let me ask you, from your own experience and then having watched students over the years as a teacher yourself, do you think that is a good practice? Do you think that's good for the students to have experience in both areas?

EW: Yeah. One was organizing a picture as a scene. Even if you're not making a finished product. That's just on this blank piece of paper where you're going to put this line or that line. That was really the basic thing. I think it helped, and some people it didn't. And I, even to this day, I couldn't set it up any way which would be the right way to approach the student to what he's going to do. Because times change and customs change. And not customs necessarily, but concepts. And that was a concept when we couldn't stand Mondrian. That's not art. Could you imagine that? And it turned out this guy is a great artist. But he's not the kind, Boris Andersfell, our teacher, was a painter. He loved the pigment. And we worked with pigment. We just didn't color in a drawing. But we painted and drew at the same time.

PK: So he would be like a precursor, in some ways, of the more gestural, what became known as abstract expressionism? Is that right?

EW: Right. Exactly. Right. But he never was. He always had subject matter. But at that particular time we had no so-called abstract kind of painters in the school. There weren't any. And that was my training.

PK: When did you finish the course there?

EW: I finished, I was supposed to finish in 1937, but three years was enough for me, so I left in 1936. And it was the time of [the] WPA art project. And I got on the art project. One painting a month and you got \$94.00 a month for that painting. The government even furnished you a model at your studio.

PK: Really?

EW: Yeah.

PK: Good. That made work for the models.

EW: Oh, yeah. It was fine.

PK: Excellent. Well, so you left before finishing your . . . ?

EW: Before I could get a degree of any sort.

PK: But that certainly didn't impede you from teaching?

EW: No, not at all.

PK: And so you started then, I guess, in 1933?

EW: Right. Right after selling ice cream at the World's Fair.

PK: Then what did you do? Did you get a teaching position right away?

EW: No, I didn't get a teaching position, I stayed on the WPA until the war curtailed all of that. And then Moholy-Nagy came over from Europe and started a school called The Institute of Design. And I went to Moholy and said that I would like to teach. He said, "Have you ever taught before?" I said, "No." He said, "Write up a teaching curriculum." At that time I didn't know what a curriculum was. And I wrote something up, the foundation of drawing, design, etc. And at Moholy's school there was no kind of painting that I was trained in. A painting kind of painter.

PK: Painterly painting. Hm-hmm.

EW: Painterly painting. And it worked out very well.

PK: Well, so they liked you bringing that particular approach?

EW: That's right. I was married then to the daughter of the vice-president of the University of Chicago. And Moholy was always impressed by some of those things. And I think even up to this date he thought by giving me a teaching job he might get some foundation money for the school. He always was way ahead of things.

PK: Was Peter Selz there at the same time?

EW: Not at that time.

PK: Because he was at one point.

EW: At one point. He was a little later.

PK: So you never met him there?

EW: No, I met him later when he was up at Oakland.

PK: Yeah, or Berkeley.

EW: Berkeley, yeah. And Moholy took me one day to Winnetka, a woman's club. He was going to show me how to lecture with slides. You had to do that in his school. He had guest people, guests coming all the time. He'd say, "Woelffer or Jack, take that one and show the slides." And I never knew what to say because I had never done it. But we went up to Winnetka and Moholy started out and he said, "Look at these slides. Look at how sharp . . ." There was some graffiti on the fence a half a block away.

PK: Even then they had graffiti?

EW: Yeah. And he said, "Look how sharp this is. It's a F-U-C-K, Fush, Fosh." But that is not for you. And I left Moholy. I said I was going to go to New York. And he said, "And you're through with me. It's all finished. It's all over with." Just like that. He about floored me.

PK: You mean just because you wanted to move on and then that was like you were rejecting him?

EW: Yeah. But the next night the phone rang and he said, "I want to come over and see you." And he said, "I don't mean what I said. It's like sending a prince out into the world, finding some new things. And you're always welcome back if you come back."

PK: That's nice.

EW: That was very nice.

PK: But you didn't go back?

EW: No, I didn't go back. I went to Yucatan for a few months to paint.

PK: You mean on the way to New York?

EW: After New York. New York I couldn't find a place to live. I had a nice house in Chicago with a little backyard and a tree. So I came back to Chicago.

PK: Oh, you did?

EW: And I went back to Moholy.

PK: Oh, you did go back?

EW: I went back. And I stayed awhile. And then I decided -- I had a friend, Frank Farishka, he collected a lot of artifacts in Yucatan. And I always liked to collect things. So my wife and I went down to Yucatan, and got the same house, huge, big house for \$10.00 a month with eight rooms. Big rooms. And the men used to dig in their "careers," they called them, their gardens and find objects. And I collected all of my pre-Columbian, Yucatan and Mayan things, when I was down there.

PK: We should pause on that for a moment. Because you have a pretty well-known and respected collection of what they call, I guess, non-western art or tribal art.

EW: African and New Guinea.

PK: And we're sitting in your house, in your living room, and basically all you can see are masks and shields and figures, carved figures of wood. It looks mostly like African.

EW: Yeah, most of it is.

PK: This isn't about teaching, I realize, but on the other hand, it's an extremely important part of your own growing experience as an artist.

EW: Because when I saw these things, when dealers would come around selling them and my first experience with this kind of thing was in the field Museum in Chicago as a young boy in grade school. They used to take us there to draw the stuffed animals. And I wasn't interested in drawing stuffed animals, so I'd move myself into the next room where all of this pre-Columbian and all the African material was. That's what turned me on. And that's my reason for later on in life when I had some money to collect some of this stuff. But I didn't want to draw stuffed animals. I liked animals before they were stuffed. When they were alive.

And then a friend of mine I went to school with named Roy Gusso was out here teaching at the Chouinard Art Institute. No, excuse me. Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center. So I went out there and I had a job immediately teaching drawing and painting at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center.

PK: When was that?

EW: That was in 1954, I think, '55.

PK: And so you went there from Mexico? Is that right?

EW: I came back to Chicago and then I rented my, leased my house out and drove out to Colorado Springs.

PK: You still had your wife, presumably?

EW: Yes. And Mrs. Pepky said, "We hate to lose you in Chicago." Walter Pepky's wife. And she said, "I'll recommend you." And I had all kinds of recommendations. And I went out to Colorado Springs. And I was there for six years.

PK: Six years?

EW: I was the head of the Fine Arts Department there. And I set up a -- it's very similar to the Art Institute -- they had a -- the first year had a design and basic drawing. And the second year you started painting. We painted from still life and painted from the model. So I started that. And we engaged a teacher who just taught basic design for the first year. And you also had drawing, figure drawing and still life and landscape drawing. And after that, the specialization. Some people specialized in print making. Some people specialized in painting. Some people took painting and print making at the same time. But it all had to do with basic drawing.

PK: So that seems to be a fundamental, a foundation . . . ?

EW: A foundation.

PK: And that was the way it was at Chicago and that's the way . . . ?

EW: That's the way I had it in Colorado. And I was in Colorado for -- Bordman Robinson was an early teacher there, whom I had heard of but didn't know him. And they got a new conservative director at the school. And they called me in the library one day and there were five trustees sitting there, the same ones that hired me some years before that. And one said to the other, "You tell him." And another said to the director, "You tell

him." And the director said, "Emerson, you've got a magnificent job here, but we want to go back to the way it used to be in the Bordman Robinson time. No abstract painting, etc." So I was sort of stunned and I felt like taking the head of this trustee and that one and banging them together.

And I finally said, "Well, I'm tired of looking at Pike's Peak for the last six or seven years." And they gave me three months to get ready and rent my house or sell it, whatever. And I had friends living in the South of Italy and I said, "Let's go over there," to my wife.

PK: Where was this in Italy?

EW: Ischia. The island of Ischia, which was in Naples in the South of Italy.

PK: So it's near Capri?

EW: Capri was a very rich island. Ischia was the poorer island.

PK: The poorer island. You went to the poor island.

EW: I went to the poor island.

PK: The Bohemian island.

EW: Bohemian island. And who was there but, who's the British actor, the famous one? He was there.

PK: Richard Burton?

EW: No. An older man. Oh, white hair. Elegant.

PK: Is he still around?

EW: No, I think he died. Famous English actor.

PK: Oh, boy, there are lots of them. Not Gielgud? Sir John Gielgud?

EW: No. In that period.

PK: That group. Okay. And he was there? Sort of like the center of the . . .

EW: They would all come down there to design and they hated that rich tourist island. Zachary Scott, LA actor from Hollywood, so many of them came down there.

PK: Actors and artists?

EW: Actors and artists. Writers. Who was the famous writer . . .?

PK: American?

EW: Another one. He's Pain and Thomas, Dylan Thomas.

PK: Oh, oh. They were there?

EW: They were there and his wife. And they liked it there. Things were cheap. Wine was cheap. And it's a beautiful . . .

PK: Yeah, Dylan Thomas would like that cheap wine.

EW: It was a wonderful place. And Sir William Walton lived there permanently. The British composer. That was wonderful.

PK: So there was this arty community that you just then became a part of by . . .?

EW: Yeah.

PK: Who was your friend who was there that invited you? Was that right?

EW: Who was it? The gal I knew in -- but anyway, Mitch Wilder was in Colorado Springs. And he called me up there and said, "You've been there three years now. It's time you get back here. I've got a job for you heading the Painting Department at Chouinard Art School."

PK: In LA?

EW: In LA. No, wait a minute. Right, right. Exactly.

PK: And what year was that? That was 1960?

EW: That was 1960, right.

PK: And so you were invited to head the . . .

EW: Fine Arts Department at Chouinard.

PK: That's a pretty good offer, right?

EW: Yeah. Mitch Wilder, I knew him from Colorado. He left there early, right after I -- headed to Buffalo Bill Museum and a few other places.

PK: Well, what did he have to do with Chouinard?

EW: He was the director. His mother was a friend of Mrs. Penroses', the Penrose Family. And he was director and he was leaving to go other places. So he needed a painter and he called me up and I left. My wife and I and the two dogs and flew out here. And found a little house up on the hill here.

PK: Nearby here?

EW: Yeah.

PK: Over on Mavis did you say?

EW: No, [inaudible] [Woelffer lives on Dustin Drive, but he was unable to remember the name of the first street they lived on] up here. Until I found this for sale.

PK: So you've been on Mount Washington from the moment you arrived in Los Angeles?

EW: Yeah.

PK: You and Jack Smith. Of course he's gone.

EW: Right. He's gone. And I taught the school at Chouinard that was Basic Plan and Design teacher. And everyone took design. Not too dissimilar to the way it was earlier. And painting. The only thing we missed here were the collections.

PK: Why don't you talk about that in general, because you . . .

EW: The collections were so important like in Chicago to go . . .

PK: At the Art Institute.

EW: For the Art Institute. They had anybody from Kandinsky down to Renoir or Giotto. The whole works. Which really is necessary. And in Colorado the students had no museum to go and look at the art.

PK: It was even worse in Colorado.

EW: Even worse. They had to get the books. I made them get the books and look at the -- it was an awful way of looking at good art. But at least they saw what was done before. And I don't know of any painter today that has come out of Colorado as a great painter of any sort. If they were there a year or two they would leave. They would go off to New York or Chicago or someplace.

PK: Well, you know the people like, for instance Roland Reiss, do you know Roland?

EW: Yes.

PK: You know, he's still out at Claremont. And I've been interviewing him but he was -- I didn't realize that he had been in Colorado. Maybe he was in Boulder. I'm not sure where he was.

EW: There was a big university at Boulder.

PK: Right. And I think DeWain Valentine was one of his students. Several people that came to L.A.

EW: Yeah.

PK: But he -- well, let me turn this into a question rather than my telling you a story. I guess what I'm really interested in is as a teacher who has some commitment to a continuum in art -- you know, to art begetting more art that students and then artists themselves look back and -- understand history, and study works of art. As someone like that, how did you deal with a situation coming from the Art Institute, how did you deal with these situations, whether it was Colorado or even Los Angeles where it wasn't actually all that easy, certainly to see great paintings? How did you deal with that? How did you cope with it? You mentioned books. But when you came here what did you find and how did you . . . ?

EW: The students would go to art galleries, there was a lot of art galleries here. La Cienega [Blvd.] was one of our [gallery areas], and once in awhile you would find some good painting. I mean, some old master painting in there. And then, of course, the County Museum helped immensely. But a lot of the kids in that particular period were very interested in doing their own thing. It was a time of getting out there and trying to get an exhibition. And then in Chicago, and we got out of art school someone would say to you, "Are you getting a gallery?" And everybody saying, "No, we don't think we're ready yet." Well, you don't hear that anymore.

PK: Right.

EW: We want to get in there right in and lick the press and the papers and get a big name and so on.

PK: Let's pursue this a little bit because obviously we're talking about your memory of the situation and, as a matter of fact, the New LA County Museum of Art opened in, was it '65?

EW: The new one.

PK: Yeah. I think it was '65. I'm not absolutely sure.

EW: Because I remember the old one.

PK: Yeah. And even in the old one downtown there were paintings to be seen and some pretty good ones.

EW: Very.

PK: But nobody would say, of course, it was like the collection of the Art Institute in Chicago, let alone the Met. But when the new museum opened in Hancock Park you could no longer say that fine art was inaccessible to the students if they wanted to go look at it.

EW: No, no. If they wanted to go.

PK: After all, Norton Simon at one point was making heavy loans to LA County Museum.

EW: Yeah. If you wanted . . .

PK: If you wanted to . . .

EW: If I had, I'd have to push them.

PK: Well, this is what I wanted to get at. So they were, if they were, if they didn't have contact with old masters, with great art or at least some great artists represented, it wasn't that they weren't available. It was simply just one reason or another they didn't care? Is that right?

EW: There were those that wanted to go and look and see it, and there were those that didn't want to know what was happening in New York. You had two different kinds of students.

PK: Do you remember specific individuals -- and that's okay if you talk about this.

EW: Yes.

PK: Some of them are probably pretty well-known. Which group?

EW: One was Larry Bell.

PK: Let's talk about Larry. Because he was your student, wasn't he?

EW: He was a student.

PK: At Chouinard?



EW: And he was busy making, drawing boxes. He started out with matchboxes and painted them. And a lot of these students, the good ones, the ones that were sort of, let's say way out . . .

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

PK: We're now on Tape 1, Side B. Emerson, sorry for the interruption. We were talking about these two groups of students and you were saying in the one group you said there were good ones who were kind of "far-out."

EW: Right. I didn't know how good they were, but they were dedicated. And sometimes I wouldn't agree with it. See, I wasn't used to this sort of thing, and I wasn't used to Los Angeles. I'm from [inaudible], the hinterlands, like you called it, in a sense.

PK: Well, was there a different feeling here then?

EW: A much different feeling.

PK: Can you describe that?

EW: Well, everything out here is sort of "way out" in a sense. You know?

PK: In what way though?

EW: Well.

PK: In the attitudes of the students towards art? Or something about the environment?

EW: I think the environment had something to do with it. What was showing in the galleries. We had some kind of way-out -- Ferus Gallery [was one] of those places that showed way-out kind of pictures and that's what these way-out students, like Larry Bell, Joe Goode -- who else? There's three or four others.

PK: Well, did you have Ed Ruscha as a . . .

EW: I had had Ruscha.

PK: Because he's, of course, now very successful.

EW: Only Ed Ruscha at that particular time was in illustration, advertising design. And I went to Aspen in the summertime and he went to Aspen because they had some way-out advertising men talking there. You know? In advertising art. And that's what Ed was interested in. And it so happened it turned out that what he was doing was the thing that was coming about in pop art. And he just blew his advertising art up on canvas and there he was, right "in." If you know what I mean.

PK: You recall then that Ferus Gallery was . . .?

EW: That was the gallery for the young people at . . .

PK: This is interesting, though, because you've described a program at Chouinard that was in some ways conservative, certainly traditional in what we may say is a very good sense, but I gather the students who made their marks were not those who adhered to the program which you basically felt was essential?

EW: Yeah.

PK: And how did you feel about that?

EW: Well, it was difficult, but I began to understand it. We'd meet at parties and things. And I could see what was going on in the whole art world and could put it together with these particular students. The other students -- a very good student that did what you said and did like you wanted and this and that -- nothing ever happened afterwards.

PK: Well, can you remember any of them?

EW: There's so many of them.

PK: Were there any though that made it?

EW: No. Not that I know of.

PK: Isn't that interesting though, because then those who played by the rules and followed the program . . .?

EW: They were just good students. They did what you told them and then that's that.

PK: And then there's Joe Goode and Ed Ruscha and Larry Bell and people like that.

EW: Yeah.

PK: Interesting. What about . . .

EW: And it was kind of a shocker to me because I just had to forget the whole background of my way of doing it. And figure here's LA and let them express themselves. That's what it was. It was not teaching them.

PK: It wasn't teaching them in the standard sense, the traditional sense.

EW: No.

PK: But nonetheless, I know from talking with them is that you had a positive influence on them. And I supposed you might say ask them what it was that you don't know. But on the other hand it seems to me that you must have established some sort of a connection or a rapport that . . .

EW: Because I talked about abstract expressionism and Kandinsky and . . .

PK: They liked that?

EW: They liked that. Where the other faculty were like their students. They were just -- I don't know the proper words to put it in. They were just good teachers, but they weren't in the swim of the art world.

PK: Well, maybe not imaginative or open perhaps. Was that it?

EW: They weren't open to it.

PK: And so probably these guys thought that even though you maybe didn't agree with some of the . . .

EW: I let them go with their [inaudible].

PK: Let them go, yeah.

EW: I let them go. And they started to show and get a little recognition. And they traveled with some of the other people out here.

PK: Well, who were the -- I want to talk a little about --

EW: Walter Hopps. And the other guy -- what was his partner's name?

PK: Henry Hopkins? That group.

EW: Yeah. They'd be at parties and they exchanged . . .

PK: Ed Kienholz?

EW: Yeah.

PK: You knew all these people.

EW: Ed Kienholz I still couldn't get to. I had a lot of study on my own. I have a big book collection. And I saw Dada and I knew Man Ray, he used to come here. And who else? Duchamp.

PK: Was he here?

EW: Yeah.

PK: In your house?

EW: Yeah. And so I . . .

PK: All those young artists you talk about, I wish I was there.

EW: Yeah, they were here. Wolfe was entertaining Duchamp.

PK: Well, that's why they thought you were so great.

EW: Probably because these guys were their god. You know. Man Ray, holy Jesus, you know.

PK: So let's just tell stories for a bit here.

EW: I could tell you one about Joe Goode but it wouldn't be nice.

PK: Well, he wouldn't care. I mean, really.

EW: But he knows this story.

PK: Yeah, and he told some funny stories himself about . . .

EW: He came in when I had a model one day. I said, "We're having a model starting Monday. Bring your canvas." And Joe came in with a big, big canvas. And I set up the model. And Joe put his easel up in the corner facing the corner of the room, not the model. And ten minutes later he threw some splashes on the canvas and Joe came to me and said, "Woelffer, here's your model." I said, "Joe, there's the door." That's a true story.

PK: And did he ever come back?

EW: Not when we had a model.

PK: Joe was just making a point. He thought that was an art statement.

EW: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I know.

PK: He was the young guy showing the older guy . . .

EW: Yeah, right, exactly.

PK: Did you see it that way at the time? Did you think it was . . .

EW: No, I thought he was an ass for doing that.

PK: You thought he was an ass? [laughs] Of course, now Joe talks about you with great admiration.

EW: I know. [inaudible] Then out here we had very interesting -- who is a director here?

PK: At the museum?

EW: No, the Otis. Well, anyway, we had . . .

PK: There's Gurdon Woods was at one time.

EW: Yeah. We had just good people come into town, because they were having shows. Matta was here. I had him lecture one day to the students.

PK: These are shows at?

EW: At some of the galleries out here.

PK: At the galleries?

EW: Yeah.

PK: And maybe at Pasadena as well?

EW: Right, right.

PK: Especially Pasadena.

EW: There's Matta and Duchamp, many times was here. And they'd lecture. I had Man Ray lecture to the students.

PK: You did?

EW: The place was packed.

PK: So they weren't unknowledgeable? These students were not hicks.

EW: I'd say that Man Ray is coming and they'd go to the library and see who he is. They'd go look at the books. And when he came, and I taped his lecture. It was wonderful.

PK: Oh, good. Do you have that?

EW: Yeah.

PK: Good. That should go in your papers.

EW: Yeah. I'll make a copy for you.

PK: Yeah. So I'm beginning to get a picture of a relationship you seem to establish at Chouinard, at least, that's where you were first, presumably, possibly carried on in your other . . .

EW: Oh, Otis just wasn't going on like that. In Chicago, at that particular time, The Arts Club at Chicago had some way-out shows. But the students weren't interested in my group. We weren't interested in that way-out stuff. Andersfell, no, don't look at that. Study the model. You know. And we respected this old master, you know. And it used to be Mr. Andersfell, and now it's Woelffer.

PK: Oh, well. That's sort of the times.

EW: It's the time, yeah.

PK: So you actually then brought to Chouinard, or were instrumental in bringing through, some pretty interesting people that apparently then re-stimulated the students. That is a kind of teaching.

EW: Right. That's real teaching. But Man Ray was fabulous. You know lately with my eyes, my memory is going too.

PK: Don't worry about it. I think mine's gone. And remember I'm only 70 [jokingly, actually 58]years old.

EW: Yeah. Oh, that's awful.

PK: I'm teasing.

EW: It used to be if you had white hair you're an old man.

PK: That's true.

EW: But it's becoming.

PK: And hopefully not a dirty old man.

EW: No.

PK: No. The clean one.

EW: I tell these girls, "What's wrong with a dirty old man? What's wrong with sex?"

PK: What do they say?

EW: Well, you know. "It's not dirty. It's nice."

PK: So I'm very interested in a role you seemed to play, and therefore because of you, Chouinard played in providing a kind of framework for some of these young artists, a few of whom have become really famous, to, I suppose, expand their whole realm of experience because . . .

EW: Before that, before Chouinard I was, no, Chouinard closed and was taken over by California Institute of the Arts.

PK: Right. Cal Arts. Very famous.

EW: And I went up there.

PK: Okay. Tell about that.

EW: And I felt absolutely lost up there. Big, beautiful rooms. Nobody knew what an easel was. Really. No painting. I had four students who would come and study with me out of that big school. And finally they hired

someone from New York.

PK: Who? Paul Brach?

EW: Yeah. Paul Brach was an old friend. I knew him way back in Chicago. And Paul came to me and said, "Emerson, you've done a good job like the other school did, but we're kind of having a way-out program and we'll have to let you go."

PK: Oh, no.

EW: Paul. And Mimi [Schapiro]. I stayed with them and when I lectured -- I juried a show in St. Louis years ago, and he and Mimi were students. And they put me up in their Quonset hut. And Mimi posed nude from here up and a long skirt, a Philip Guston painting. And it got the top prize at the Carnegie International. The Portrait of Mimi by Philip Guston.

PK: I wonder if they know that was Mimi.

EW: I don't know if anyone knew it was Mimi or not.

PK: That's interesting.

EW: Guston used to live here. His father had a cleaning establishment on the corner of Sixth Street.

[Recording Stops]  
[Recording Begins Again]

PK: We were talking before the phone rang . . .

EW: Is it on already?

PK: It's on now. And we were talking about Guston. You were talking about Guston's father had a cleaning establishment. And then the Mimi Schapiro.

EW: Yeah. When I went out to St. Louis to jury an exhibition that's when I first met Paul Brach and he put me up in his Quonset hut with his wife Mimi. And then later on he was at Cal Arts.

PK: So were you there when Guston was painting her? I'm just curious.

EW: No. No, that's way before my time.

PK: Oh, that happened where?

EW: That's way early.

PK: Because if Brach was a student, where were they a student did you say? In St. Louis?

EW: In St. Louis.

PK: I see. And where was . . .

EW: Since they got their degree there.

PK: So where did Guston come together with them? In New York?

EW: In St. Louis he was there.

PK: Oh, he was in St. Louis.

EW: He was a teacher there. And he painted Mimi. And put that painting in a -- [inaudible] it got the top prize. And then later when he left school I saw him around Chicago for a little bit. He was looking for a job. And he got a job at Cal Arts. You know, it's all young in -- I mean, the people.

PK: So he came after you had been hired?

EW: Yeah.

PK: Brach came after you?

EW: You mean at Cal Arts?

PK: Cal Arts, yeah.

EW: No.

PK: Did he hire you?

EW: Who hired -- this faculty automatically moved over. And right away they started knocking them off. And Paul kept me because . . .

PK: Because he liked you.

EW: Because he liked me, yeah. And I remember the first lecture, the whole faculty. And he ended up his talk, "You are all artists. Go do your thing." Wow! What something that is to be in that art school.

PK: I love it. That was it?

EW: That was it. And they all departed to their little rooms and started to do their thing. Yeah, that was it. "You are all artists. Now get up and do your thing." That threw me.

PK: Would you describe that as the guiding principle, the educational principle at Cal Art?

EW: And then he left and went east. And Mimi was teaching in the east. And Paul, up to now he's designing cowboy boots. Creating designs for the fancy . . .

PK: When was he doing that?

EW: That's what he's doing.

PK: Now?

EW: Yeah.

PK: He is?

EW: He is.

PK: I didn't know that.

EW: Yeah.

PK: I'll bet they're great.

EW: Probably. For Saks Fifth Avenue cowboys.

PK: Well, he's doing his thing.

EW: Yeah, he's doing his thing. And Mimi's making quite a reputation as a painter.

PK: They spoke at the series of conversations that Henry Hopkins sponsored at the Geffen Theater in Westwood. That Sunshine Noir show. Which, by the way, I can't remember... I don't think you're in it, and everybody says that's wrong.

EW: Oh, yeah. I'm not in a lot of them.

PK: Are you in it?

EW: I don't hang with them. I don't know.

PK: Of course, you're not the only one that's not in . . .

EW: No. It used to bother me but it doesn't anymore.

PK: You know, I'm not entirely sure, so I shouldn't even say that.

EW: Maybe they took a certain age group or something. But anyway, all the museums and -- I'm happy.

PK: So how do you . . .

EW: I . . .

PK: Go ahead.

EW: I always go where the movement isn't. I should be living in Venice. Where do I live? In Highland Park, you know.

PK: Yeah, but this is arty.

EW: Yeah, it's arty.

PK: There are artists around here.

EW: I never see, except John [Berry] and Inez [Johnston].

PK: There are also a lot of rock musicians, I think, around here.

EW: Yeah, I hear some now and then.

PK: Do you?

EW: Yeah.

PK: Free entertainment.

EW: But I still, if I start teaching again I think I'd do it the same way.

PK: Let's go back again to sort of trace your movements. I am, of course, very interested in your time at Chouinard and your experience there. You've said a few things about it. I'm trying to get a feeling for that place, because for one reason or another, some of the most famous LA artists of a generation came from Chouinard. And to them, at least the ones I've talked to, they mention you, almost the first name that comes to their mind. So there's got to be a reason for this. And one of the things you've mentioned is you're introducing them to ideas, to other art, Kandinsky you said.

EW: And if they'd stop me in the hall and ask a question, most teachers would say, "I'll see you [in class]." I always had time for a student regardless of what the question was.

PK: Do you think that they thought of you then as a kind of mentor? Even though, and maybe you didn't agree exactly with their style?

EW: Yeah. They respected my painting and would go to my shows. Joe Goode went to my last show. He was there. And Ruscha. They always go to my shows. And so I hitched a ride with a friend of mine to go to see Joe's show. Joe had a show at Manny Silverman's a few months ago.

PK: Oh, yeah. I did see that.

EW: But I was there. And they're always, wherever I have something going on.

PK: Well, if you ever want to go over to Louver or some place when Ed or -- well, Joe shows there and Ed shows at the Gagosian Gallery.

EW: Louver respects me. He's been here.

PK: Peter Goulds?

EW: Yeah.

PK: Yeah, well, he should.

EW: They all -- I don't know.

PK: Well, you've got a great deal, Manny is a terrific guy. Very smart too.

EW: Yeah.

PK: But somehow you established a connection with these artists and then I think it was cut off when you started to talk about Larry Bell as a student. Would you tell again what he was like as a student of yours?

EW: Larry Bell was a good student. He spent most of his time in the workshop building his boxes and things.

PK: And you said all he wanted to draw was boxes?

EW: Yeah.

PK: Why would he want to do that?

EW: I don't know.

PK: I mean, why go to art school -- why go to Chouinard -- why do these people go to Chouinard . . .

EW: Maybe you need a report on whether people that are doing something. Just being around.

PK: Well, do you think that's what Chouinard provided these people? Because apparently they weren't interested in life drawing. Or at least Joe Goode.

EW: Well, there was -- what's his name, the drawing teacher, he died recently.

PK: Who was that?

EW: Jepson, Herb Jepson. Big time name.

PK: Did he actually teach at Chouinard? He had his own school.

EW: Later on -- who was behind his school? Some other -- was it Rico LeBrun? -- and when Herb left he came to Chouinard and he taught drawing. Very basic kind of drawing.

PK: Was he good?

EW: He was good. But he was too -- he had to do it "my way." You know, you can draw the figure many different ways and still have the figure and still show the characteristic on the model. But you had to do his way. You had to do this charcoal on a certain kind of newsprint paper. And I said, "Herb, don't use newsprint paper. That will disintegrate. If a guy gets a good drawing he might want to keep it a few years." "Nope." That's the way he was. I was never that stringent. If someone wanted to do painting a little way this way or a little way that way, I would allow it. Because I felt there was a personality that has to come out also of the individual. I don't want to stifle that in somebody. So I said, "Go ahead. Go ahead. I can tell if it has some quality to it. And the feeling of the paint." Or if you want to paint like Andersfell told me. I still paint like [I was painting] a barn. Flat. You don't teach anybody to be an artist.

PK: Well, you know what you said earlier and it did get on tape, I want you to say it again, but it had to do with whether to be a good artist you need to go to art school. Didn't you say that no great artist really went to art school?

EW: Yeah. And if they did they stayed a year or so. But they didn't work up for their degree.

PK: Well, what do you think about this notion; remember, I went to UCLA and at the time -- I don't know how it is now -- the art history and the studio were really in the same department.

EW: Art history is very important.

PK: And so the idea, I guess, was that art history is important for artists as well, and maybe even some studio practice, or at least a little bit is important.

EW: Right. For those that are going to be art historians.

PK: Yeah. And so UCLA used to be that way. I don't know how it is now. But . . .

EW: I had some -- oh, go ahead.

PK: Well, I don't want to go on about this. But, I guess, my point was the need for -- your views about the need for artists to at least confront ideas, the history of art, sure. Hopefully, being somewhat aware of how things got to the point where they drop into the picture, but even more than that the whole of humanities ideas -- the history of ideas or more to the point, some point of view about the world that you can bring into the art.

EW: Yeah.

PK: And art school presumably is supposed to do that. How did you feel about that? Or did you feel it was happening in Chouinard and the other places you had taught at here in LA?



EW: That I'd brought in?

PK: Well, the whole importance of a broader human experience?

EW: Music and poetry ...

PK: Right.

EW: Yeah. Absolutely.

PK: Ideas. You know, a point of view about being in the world. Do you feel that many of these younger artists even had that?

EW: No. I really don't.

PK: That's what I want to hear about then.

EW: I really don't. There's a gal that teaches here -- she comes over now and then and we go shopping. Her name is Joyce Lightbody. And she brought a student over with her one day to look at my stuff. And she just graduated. I said, "Oh, are you a painter?" She said, "No, I'm a drawer." I said, "What?" She said, "I draw. I got a degree in drawing." I said, "I've got a drawing for you." So I brought out my Jules Pascin drawing. "Who's he?"

PK: No.

EW: Yes.

PK: Where did she get her drawing degree?

EW: Otis.

PK: At Otis?

EW: I had a good drawing teacher, a friend of mine that comes up here and they canned him last semester.

PK: Who's that?

EW: Wingo is his name. Wingo. Good draftsman.

PK: Oh, I know that guy. What's his name?

EW: Michael Wingo.

PK: Oh, I know Wingo.

EW: He's a good teacher. Good solid drawing. And they canned him.

PK: Now?

EW: Now. This is his first semester he didn't teach there.

PK: But this seems strange because it would be my expectation that now in this post-modernist era of ours where there is a kind of return to figure drawing, that there has been, that this would be valued.

EW: Well, you would think so, but no.

PK: Well, what has been your experience in these schools?

EW: That's one reason I left. But I found out later that they were going to let me go anyway.

PK: From Otis?

EW: Yeah.

PK: Well, let's get you from CalArts then, so we can have a record of this. Paul Brach fired you.

EW: Yeah.

PK: Put simply, right? Even though he hated to do it, right?

EW: Yeah.

PK: And the reason was because you weren't fitting into their idea of a great creative art environment. Is that right?

EW: That's right.

PK: And so this is like this utopian notion . . .

EW: They got some young cat from New York.

PK: Who was that? Do you remember?

EW: It's a lady I have nothing against, naturally, but I can't think of her name. And I heard her, the first year lecture to the student body. All she talked about was the performance and the conceptual. I didn't understand it.

PK: The students probably didn't either. But it sounded good, you know.

EW: It sounded good.

PK: But anyway, you and CalArts were not a, clearly not a match.

EW: No. Not at all.

PK: And I guess the reason is is that you basically were trained. Came out of a fairly disciplined and rigorous academic, if you will, traditional drawing kind of experience?

EW: Yeah. After that when you're drawing do whatever you want.

PK: But, certainly at CalArts that wasn't seen as any kind of a virtue or necessary. Is that right?

EW: No, right.

PK: Because I get the feeling that this was very much the case, and it's partly a result, not of this conceptualism but of abstract expressionism, because at the Art Institute, San Francisco Art Institute, one of the things that happened during those days, but a little thereafter was de-emphasis of life drawing.

EW: Really?

PK: Yeah.

EW: There was a head over there, which I knew, a well-known guy. What's his name? Or was his name?

PK: At the San Francisco Art Institute?

EW: I think.

PK: [Douglas] MacAgy.

EW: No. I knew of him, never met him. But there's somebody else that was teaching there.

PK: Teaching?

EW: Probably out there -- no. I forget his name even.

PK: When was this? I might know.

EW: Oh, about twelve, fifteen years ago.

PK: Fifteen years ago?

EW: What's his name? No, I knew him in Chicago, a writer, Japanese. He was the head of the school.

PK: I'm drawing a blank.

EW: A Japanese. I knew him in Chicago. Terrific guy. He had a collection of Picasso and all these people.

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A]  
[conversation underway]

EW: But she said, "He wants it, we'll get it for him."

PK: But that sounds good. I mean, she was trying to be helpful.

EW: Yeah. Right. Oh, yes. She fought for the artist.

PK: That's good. We're talking about June Wayne and we're now on. This is Emerson Woelffer and Paul Karlstrom continuing this first session on 26 March 1999 and this is Tape 2, Side A. How did we get on June? Oh, I know, we were talking and we don't have to spend much time on it, but it is relevant because we're talking about people who were prominently involved in the art community here say in the 60's. And you were mentioning, well, Jules Langsner and June Harwood. Then we got going on June Wayne. I would like to ask you also about a few other people like Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeberg.

EW: I knew her. I met her. I wasn't close with her.

PK: What about Lorser? Did you have any interaction with him? Because he was a teacher, an artist, but also a teacher who had a collection of drawings that was quite notable.

EW: He taught at the Art Center, didn't he?

PK: I guess so, yeah. Did you know him at all?

EW: I've met him, yeah. But never . . .

PK: I'm sort of surprised because this was a small art community.

EW: I know it. I never got around. My wife, she'd go to a party and she'd listen. She's a listener.

PK: Well, I remember her. Remember we met years ago?

EW: Yeah. Very brilliant. I don't know, I just never what you call swung and swang or something.

PK: But you certainly knew about Lorser?

EW: I knew him, oh, yes. Wingo studied with him.

PK: Did he?

EW: He thought he was terrific.

PK: What's Wingo's first name?

EW: Michael.

PK: Mike Wingo. He has a studio on . . .

EW: On Figueroa Street.

PK: Near here?

EW: Yeah.

PK: Say hi to him.

EW: I will.

PK: Wingo, yeah, Wingo, he's a nice guy. Let me collect my thoughts here, because I don't want to force you to make up connections that didn't exist.

EW: No, I wouldn't do that.

PK: But you did have -- you did and do know June Harwood. And I gather knew Jules Langsner?

EW: Very well.

PK: Would they come up here and . . .

EW: Yeah, and he did some articles on some of my shows. He was good.

PK: What about -- we were talking about schools -- part of the effectiveness of schools or a place for students to be, I think, has to do with the stimulation of an environment.

EW: Right.

PK: They find a realm and to be able to read locally as well as in the national press critics, historians talking about art.

EW: Yeah. We had a good library at school and all our journals . . .

PK: At Chouinard?

EW: At Otis.

PK: At Otis?

EW: Yeah.

PK: Okay. Why don't we then move you from CalArts. Did you go after CalArts to Otis?

EW: I was unemployed for awhile.

PK: How long?

EW: And what happened? Oh, then CalArts -- Otis hired me.

PK: After a bit of a break between?

EW: Yeah.

PK: Was it like a year?

EW: And the directors, Neil Hoffman.

PK: Neil Hoffman, sure. Oh, yeah, he went up to CCAC.

EW: The first thing he did, he came here and bought a collage from me. And then all of a sudden he wasn't there anymore. He went to Chicago to the Art Institute. And I understand his wife didn't like Chicago and his children, two daughters, didn't like it. And he didn't. And somehow his wife didn't fit in with the ladies clubs and that stuff. And he left and went back up north.

PK: Yeah, to CCAC, California College of Arts and Crafts.

EW: And the first thing you know he was back at Otis again.

PK: Well, now did he hire you?

EW: No, I was already there.

PK: Oh. Well, who hired you?

EW: The guy -- what's his -- you mentioned his name before.

PK: I did? Gurdon Woods?

EW: Gurdon Woods.

PK: Okay. So Gurdon hired you and he was before Neil?

EW: Before the last trip of Neil.

PK: Okay. Between Neil?

EW: Between Neil, yeah. Someone let him go. I don't know who. Someone in the trustees probably.

PK: I know him. He lives up in . . .

EW: Near the beach or something.

PK: In Santa Cruz.

EW: Yeah.

PK: Somewhere up there. I correspond a little bit with him, but I haven't seen him for awhile. Okay. So you then went to Otis. Now, you were at Chouinard, which you characterize in a certain way. I think I get the picture. You then went to CalArts, which you characterized in a different way.

EW: Yeah.

PK: Before we move to Otis I want to ask you, do you remember any -- well, you said you only had a few students, not many wanted to take . . .

EW: At CalArts, yeah. They weren't -- the people that went there were not painting.

PK: But what about Eric Fischl? That wasn't the same time?

EW: No.

PK: That was before Eric Fischl showed up.

EW: Maybe even after.

PK: Because he's really into painting.

EW: Oh, yeah. Big paintings. I remember.

PK: Yeah, like nudes on the beach and all kinds of strange imagery, but . . .

EW: I don't know how he left.

PK: Or David Salle was there. And he's into drawing and . . .

EW: David Salle. Oh, yeah.

PK: These are some of the famous --- maybe Baldessari students. Was John there when you were there? Or were you before Baldessari? You were before.

EW: Well, I lectured for Baldessari down south one time. And when he wanted to come to CalArts to teach I gave him a letter of recommendation. And I didn't know what he was in to. And now he has a show with a stick in the middle of the room or something.

PK: He got pretty famous.

EW: Yeah.

PK: Yeah. And his students were -- he's credited . . .

EW: He drew all these . . .

PK: Really hot students, I guess. I mean, he turned out to be at least famous. There was a time then after you left when CalArts became the great incubator for some of the leading young artists in America.

EW: Yeah.

PK: It was the great art school. You know, by the way, do you know what the art school is supposed to be now?

EW: No.

PK: From everything I hear UCLA.

EW: Really?

PK: Yeah.

EW: Good.

PK: They've got Lari Pittman for instance.

EW: Oh, Lari, he's hot.

PK: Chair of the department, I think.

EW: Roy Dowell is the head of the painting at Otis now.

PK: Yeah.

EW: And he was Lari Pittman's friend.

PK: Oh, is that right?

EW: Oh, yeah. Pittman, yeah.

PK: So they're partners?

EW: They're partners.

PK: Yeah. Really? Well --

EW: I like them both.

PK: So you did keep up? You know these people?

EW: Yeah, I know them.

PK: Do they come visit you sometimes?

EW: Roy Dowell comes here. Because I remember Roy Dowell when he worked in a Mexican trinket shop. And he came to Otis. I was his boss. And then the first thing you know things turned around, he was the boss of the whole thing.

PK: Okay. Let's get you from CalArts to Otis. There was a period of maybe a year you were unemployed. But then you were hired -- you got a phone call from Gurdon Woods, I guess, right?

EW: Yeah.

PK: And they came to you?

EW: Yeah.

PK: And what was Otis like then? Vis-a-vis CalArts and the other universities? What was Otis's special . . . ?

EW: It was like the old art school. You know, the drawing, painting and illustration and art history. Now I don't know what their art history background is.

PK: Did it suit you? I mean, did you feel comfortable with the program at Otis?

EW: I was fine until -- and I don't know if Neil Hoffman did it or who did it. Or maybe the trustees, the hot ladies wanted something swinging. I don't know. But it completely changed all of a sudden. I had the painting department, a master's degree program, I was the head of. And somebody was -- one student he was bringing these artificial penises and painting stripes and polka dots on them.

PK: Very clever.

EW: Clever? That's about what the master program became. They wanted to be rid of these students. And I couldn't -- what do I know what to do with the classroom. Sit there and twiddle my thumb?

PK: What does that have to do with painting? That's called surface application.

EW: That's why I decided to leave. And I left before Neil Hoffman came back again.

PK: When did you decide to leave? What year was that?

EW: '88, '89.

PK: So you've been really retired for about ten years.

EW: Yeah. I retired, I think, before my wife died. She died in 1990. And Hoffman came back and he's the one

that called me up and said he's talking about an annuity that we should keep all your work. And I told that to Manny [Silverman, EW's dealer] and Manny thought it was a great idea because otherwise what will happen to my work.

PK: Is Neil the head of it now?

EW: He's the head of it now.

PK: Yeah.

EW: And I said, "No, I don't want that.", and Manny thought it would be a good idea. Who's going to take care of all my paintings, four or five hundred. So I signed that I would do it. And they just finished -- they had a man up there who has a big room where the fashion department is downtown that the windows are all in wrapping paper, someone can look in. And for the last three or four months he even photographed each painting. The condition of it, etc., etc. And when it was done, the size, everything. And now that he's finished Manny and his director, the gal [Linda Hooper], they're going to sit down and itemize what each one is worth. And then Neil is somehow, with their lawyer or something are going to find out and give me so much a month for ten years. And I won't be around in ten years.

PK: It's possible.

EW: It's possible. But when the money is left over and I am gone it would go to a fund for scholarships and this and that.

PK: Well, that's good.

EW: Yeah. They've never done that before.

PK: Because then your legacy will still be attached to a teaching institution.

EW: Right. And Manny will handle the -- to show them or whatever.

PK: So is there a foundation set up?

EW: They're setting one up now. The first one in this...

PK: Okay. It's interesting. I'd like to talk about that, not now, but later. Because I'm involved with the -- I just had a meeting recently with the Hans Burkhardt Foundation. Did you know Hans at all?

EW: Oh, I knew him well.

PK: Tell me about Hans.

EW: His dealer.

PK: Jack Rutberg.

EW: Yeah. But old Hans, the old Swiss. Yeah. He knew I was, my family is Switzerland.

PK: Oh, so your background is Swiss?

EW: German and French, my mother's side were French, Swiss.

PK: But you were born in this country?

EW: I was born in Chicago.

PK: What year?

EW: 1914. I was a -- not a deficiency. I was a -- what do you call it?

PK: Deferment.

EW: No, to keep out of the war.

PK: Deferment.

EW: Deferment. I guess, Father, he didn't want to go to war.

PK: Well, who would? Burkhardt taught at Northridge along with a man you may know -- these are people who like drawing by the way.

EW: That's right.

PK: When Irving Block taught there. Did you know Irving?

EW: No, I don't. But that's when I was between jobs before getting to Otis they were looking for somebody at . . .

PK: Northridge.

EW: Northridge. So I went there and someone interviewed me. And I was joking. We were talking about how I was kicked out of teaching here and there. And it didn't go over big apparently because they didn't hire me.

PK: They hired Hans?

EW: No. This is when Hans left.

PK: Oh, okay. Well, you know, I don't know much about the program at Northridge, although they had some interesting people teaching there. But in terms of painting and drawing they had Irving Block and Hans Burkhardt, both of whom in one way could be considered traditionalist.

EW: Yeah.

PK: After all, Hans was famously a friend of DeKooning and a studio assistant to Gorky in New York.

EW: Oh, yeah. He always [inaudible].

PK: And so this is the kind of connection that in a way, I think, you represent in terms of some of the people you knew.

EW: Oh, I was an old friend of DeKooning and Jackson Pollock, both.

PK: Well, see? I mean, isn't it ironic that then you have that kind of community or at least friendships, and you become cast as, I don't want to say reactionary, but certainly by your friend Paul Brach and CalArts as backward looking.

EW: Yeah.

PK: Representing the rear garde rather than the avant garde.

EW: Right.

PK: What would have happened if DeKooning had tried to get a job at CalArts? Or Jackson Pollock?

EW: Well, they had such a big reputation it might have worked. I think they wouldn't have any problem.

PK: But I don't see any way that they would represent the most avant garde thing.

EW: No, no, they wouldn't.

PK: It's rear garde.

EW: Yeah.

PK: They might have given a job to Jasper Johns or Rauschenberg or somebody like that.

EW: It was Greenberg who brought Pollock to Chicago to -- they had hired a jury a show that was in reaction to the yearly Art Institute show that is open to all us local artists. And when they came to Chicago everybody put up a painting for Greenberg and Jackson Pollock. Oh, my. And Noah Gadolski, he's a head of a steel company, his father up in Winnetka, where they lived, invited Pollock and Greenberg to a big dinner party. This is a . . .

PK: You were there?

EW: Yeah. And the table was set for, oh, my god, about twenty-five, thirty people.

PK: This is Chicago?

EW: Yeah. And to meet Jackson Pollock, he was drinking at that time. When I went to visit him on Long Island I



brought a couple of bottles of whiskey and his wife said, "Put that away, for god's sake."

PK: Lee Krasner?

EW: Yeah. Lee said, "He's on the wagon now."

PK: That didn't last forever.

EW: But anyway, in Chicago at the dinner table everybody was around him, "Oh, you're Jackson. What is this you're doing?" And he was drinking and he got so fed up at the dinner table he took one of the gold plates and smashed it down across the table and broke other dishes.

PK: Wow. You saw it?

EW: Yeah.

PK: And what did they do?

EW: Well, the man that was giving the dinner party felt sorry for him and bought a big painting.

PK: Oh, my god. Really?

EW: Yeah.

PK: Because he was a brat?

EW: Yeah.

PK: The abstract expressionism . . .

EW: He liked my -- I used to collect sports cars. I had a British MG, it used to belong to Gary Cooper. And he loved it and he was flying it around.

PK: Who loved it?

EW: Pollock.

PK: Pollock?

EW: He loved fast cars.

PK: Well, where was this sports car?

EW: Up in Long Island. I sold it in Colorado. I needed the money and it didn't work anymore. I had to take the engine out and put a Studebaker engine in it. But it was a gorgeous thing. It was a British Daimler [AC, sports car]. All kinds -- I had two Rolls Royces.

PK: You were really a collector.

EW: Yeah, I collected.

PK: Did you collect art -- not so much -- well, no, I can't say this. You do have some western art, modernist art. Yeah, you do, so I don't want to disrespect that. But your greatest collecting interest seem to be the non-western.

EW: Yeah.

PK: But then I hear you also collected or are interested in cars.

EW: Yeah. I'll show you. Maybe you'd like a photograph for your archives.

PK: Of a car?

EW: Yeah.

PK: Yeah.

EW: Do you do that?

PK: On photographs, sure. Anything that you want to put in your papers you can. I'm going to turn this off now.

[Recording Stops]

[Recording Begins Again]

PK: Okay. Here we're looking at a photograph of a car, oh, my god, look at this. This just reeks of classic.

EW: That's an AC.

PK: Is this in Chicago? Where is this?

EW: Chicago.

PK: Chicago. That's the . . .

EW: In Colorado. If you want these you can have them.

PK: Sure. We'll add them to your papers. I ought to tell where they are though. Later I'll write down.

EW: They're sold.

PK: No, no. I mean, where the pictures were taken. What we're seeing here is a series of, several photographs, Colorado license plate here on this -- what is this?

EW: Daimler.

PK: Daimler, yeah. And, wow! So what we'll do later on is just maybe make some notes on this. Sure, these would be great. Okay. So we'll talk about these later and they are impressive. Who would have thought? But it's pretty clear -- well, for our story, the interesting thing is that Jackson Pollock used to drive around in one of your cars?

EW: Yeah. He loved this British AC.

PK: And how did he get to drive around in it?

EW: I drove it from Chicago to Black Mountain College, when I taught one summer, with it. And Vashi and Veena, two Hindu dancers were there at school. One was studying architecture, the other was studying town planning. And they came from India, but they only could take so much money out. So when they landed in New York they danced on the stage to make enough money. Then they came down to Black Mountain College to study. And when the summer was over I said, "We're driving down to Yucatan." He said, "Why don't we drive up to New York." I have a friend, Jackson Pollock, up there. So he and the wife sat in the back. It was a tour. And Dina in the front with me.

PK: And you drove up to Long Island?

EW: To Long Island. And Veena all she had was a bag with all kinds of saris. She didn't need a suitcase. And Vashi, she had a suitcase in the back. And we drove. And all she wanted was hamburgers and all the way driving to Long Island and Vashi, of course, didn't eat meat.

PK: No. And then you went up and visited Pollock?

EW: Went up to visit Pollock.

PK: And is that when you took some bottles of scotch or something?

EW: Yeah.

PK: And Lee Krasner said, "Oh, no, no, he's . . .?"

EW: So we put them in the back of the car.

PK: What year was that? About? Fifty?

EW: No. '49.

PK: '49.

EW: We were on our way to Yucatan [kiddingly].

PK: I see.

EW: With this car. I don't know how we got there. But anyway, he said, "It's not far from Yucatan [kidding], up where Pollock lives, Jackson Pollock." So we drove up there.

PK: But when you visited Jackson Pollock -- I've got to know this -- he knew you were an artist?

EW: Yeah.

PK: Here was an artist. You had been down to Black Mountain. Did you talk about art at all?

EW: He never talked about art.

PK: He talked about cars?

EW: Yeah, he loved cars. He wanted speed. And Alfonso Ossario bought his first big paintings at a dinner party for all of us. He was a very rich man, you know. I think he's dead now. They're all gone now.

PK: Well, not all.

EW: No, but most.

PK: Zorthian is still here.

EW: Yeah, that's right. But Alfonso had a beautiful house not far from Pollock's, about a mile or so. Gorgeous place. And that's when Pollock and I sat in the corner and started drinking. We did talk a little about art. He said it makes no sense. That's what he said. This is true. I asked him about his technique. He said, "It makes no sense to take a stick with some hairs on it and drip it in the paint." He laughed.

PK: Who was doing that?

EW: That's the kind of painter I was. I would dip, you know, paint brushes.

PK: Oh, I see.

EW: And he said, "It makes no sense to me to do it like that."

PK: And what did you say?

EW: He said, "I have to pour it on."

PK: And what did you say?

EW: That's what he said. He said, "I pour it on." He said, "I have to express myself."

PK: Did he really say that?

EW: Yeah.

PK: That he has to express himself?

EW: Yeah, that's what he said.

PK: And it makes no sense to put a stick with hairs . . . ?

EW: It makes no sense at all. How could I fill a can with ..., you know. I used to call it -- I'd paint with a stick with the bristles of a pig's back on the end of a stick.

PK: That's great. It makes no sense. You remember very well that he said, "It makes no sense"?

EW: Oh, yeah. We were sitting in a corner, he and I, together. Because he liked to talk to artists apparently. And we were drinking together. But then when he got boiled after that when dinner was served he was really loaded.

PK: Did you see the way he interacted with Lee Krasner? With his wife?

EW: No.

PK: Was there anything notable about that?

EW: No, nothing at all.

PK: He was respectful and cordial even though he was drunk?

EW: Oh, yeah.

PK: What an interesting thing. Well, what about Black Mountain? We were talking about schools.

EW: Yeah. I taught there for the summer.

PK: Summer class in, well, it was in '49.

EW: Yeah. And I was teaching the first half and we got down there a day early and they said, "You have to pick the weeds up [help clean up] because you have to earn your . . ." they weren't paying me anything. Bucky Fuller hired me, because he was the head of the school that summer. Buckminster Fuller.

PK: What do you mean they weren't paying you?

EW: I got, I guess, twenty bucks for the half a summer. On my way to Yucatan.

PK: Did you do it just for the fun of it or what? I mean, did people teach there for the fun of it?

EW: They weren't getting big money. You got your room and board.

PK: Oh, you got room and board plus twenty bucks or something like that?

EW: Yeah. And Bucky -- there was a group of students that stayed for the summer, and they had nothing to do with Bucky's students or Bucky. It was a split kind of thing. We were crazy. And the students I had for the first half of the summer were going to be painters. We painted outside underneath a building where I had a big space. And they were going to town buying buckets, big buckets of house paint, because the second half of the summer the teacher was going to be Bill DeKooning. And they wanted to get prepared for, you know. So when I left I heard later that Bill DeKooning came. They said, "We're ready, Bill. Here's the paint and the buckets." He gave them each a 4H pencil and a piece of writing paper and set up a little still life of some nuts and things and said, "This is the way I learned. This is the way you're going to do it. We're going to make this drawing for the rest of the summer."

PK: So you get right back to where you came from?

EW: Right. That was something. Oh, I had left already, but I heard it.

PK: They didn't like that?

EW: Oh, no. They thought they were going to do a big DeKooning.

PK: How interesting. Would you sort of generalize, or could you generalize about the progress of art schooling or art education in terms of discipline and skill and craft at one point, and then becoming --- what? I mean, how would you describe, from your observations, starting in Chicago, sort of embrace the whole scene.

EW: It just, let us say it broke open. Whatever that expression would be. A new deal came in like a lot of -- I don't know if you can relate it to music or not. In music you have to really -- in order to play an instrument you have to know how to play the instrument.

PK: That's true.

EW: But you've got a brush -- Pollock was the cause of this, I think, the big explosion ... of photographs of him on the glass, painting.

PK: Hans Namuth photographs. Yeah.

EW: Anything goes. You know. You don't need a discipline.

PK: Well, so that's what you found when you came to teaching in LA?

EW: That's what I found.

PK: Even in LA, which of course, was a bit removed from . . .

EW: New York.

PK: And you found this kind of attitude and sort of excitement that anything goes. Is this what . . . ?

EW: It was just starting. Yeah.

PK: But did they work pretty hard, some of those students or not? What was your impression?

EW: Now they've got rooms with all the --

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B]

PK: You were talking about what you find now at Otis. You were talking about work stations, I guess, set up with computers and students actually, maybe when you were still there, but at least they'll show up presenting to their teacher drawings that were done on a computer.

EW: Yeah.

PK: What does that have to do with what you understand as . . . ?

EW: I don't understand it [at] all. I'm not interested in it. I think computers are fine in certain things, like people who came the other day they said Woelffer lives at 475 Dustin Drive and I'm here. And the computer tells them what streets to take to get right to my house. That's terrific.

PK: That's pretty good. Yeah.

EW: But when they use that stuff for what's called A-R-T that takes a different color. What's the other thing they do? Dance or something. They call it performance.

PK: Performance art.

EW: Performance art.

PK: Well, that became very big starting in the sixties, especially in the seventies ...

EW: That's, I think, about the same. I love good ballet, good dancing. But who knows? Something is going to live of this whole thing. Any time there's a new movement or something, whether you think about it or not, the best of it is going to remain. It's going to be part of the whole history of things. Always. Remember when the students used to say, "Mondrian and Kandinsky and Jesus."

PK: And the Old Masters.

EW: And Old Masters.

PK: What about -- a lot is made about the influx of Duchamp here. And especially in California. It's interesting.

EW: Oh, yeah.

PK: I'm sure you've heard about this, you were around, you knew him, you knew the students. And certainly I'm sure you've read about this, but a great deal is made of his appearance and his influence. Like giving a direction to the best of LA art and artists. Do you agree with that at all?

EW: No, I don't.

PK: Do you think that's made up after the facts?

EW: I think that you're right. Yeah, I think it is. After the fact. Why do Duchamp now when, you know, or Man Ray. That was Dada. It was nothing to be influenced by in this sort of stuff. Like painting you could be influenced by this early painting or doing something modern, new or whatever onto it by the act of painting. If you look at paintings, painting, the quality, I think that's sort of lost.

PK: Do you think that the students basically have lost a connection with the materials of art, or at least the traditional ones?

EW: Yeah.

PK: That it has no meaning for them per se?

EW: No.

PK: Even though in this . . .

EW: They'll go with the [inaudible] probably. I don't know what the young would think of it.

PK: I would hope they'd be impressed. Because none of them -- I hate to say this, it sounds reactionary, but it's most unlikely that any of them will come close to that intensity of expression.

EW: Yeah. They have a lack of feeling of self-expression, or the feeling into the work. It's cold. Cold and calculated.

PK: Well, for careerist reasons do you think it's calculated or strategized in terms of what's going to make a splash in the market? Is this . . . ?

EW: I think some of them don't think of the market.

PK: What do they think of?

EW: Most of them, I run into them later on in life and they've given up the painting, given it up. They have to make a living.

PK: But if they paid attention to the market they might be able to make a living. [laughs]

EW: But the fatality [rate] is fantastic to be an artist.

PK: Yeah.

EW: All the guys I went to school with -- Arthur Osver, he was a big, big name in the thirties, forties and early fifties. Arthur Osver, O-S-V-E-R. We still talk to each other. He lives in St. Louis now. He used to use, in one of his paintings, he used to paint rooftops. He was interested in the water towers on roofs and things. That was his kind of painting he did. Well, painting, whether you liked the idea or not, you would have to say that it was a good painting. And this is something you don't have today. I don't like what you do but it's sure beautiful painting.

PK: Do you think any of -- let's talk about the people we know in common and like -- what about Joe Goode? I mean, some people would say some of his work is really quite beautiful, but I'm not sure they would say it's beautiful as painting. What do you think?

EW: I agree there. That doesn't excite me. His work, to tell you the truth, never did excite me. But I respected him for what he was doing. He was devoted to what he was doing. And it was maybe going to be important or maybe it isn't. Who knows? But the fact is, for me personally, Ruscha doesn't excite me at all. They're wonderful guys. They're dedicated in what they do and that's all that is important.

PK: Isn't it interesting though, Ed Ruscha, who's a mutual friend of ours, has enjoyed actually enormous success. Of all the California artists of that generation he may be the internationally the most prominent.

EW: Yeah. He just was doing what he was going to school for, to do advertising art. And he just hit it at the time of pop art. And there was probably an -- he didn't think of it as that way -- it's probably an accidental thing because I used to look at his work at school and he had to do it on the illustration board. He drew the illustration.

PK: A graphic artist.

EW: Graphic art.

PK: But then, of course, what has made it possible for Ed is this cool irony, this sense of humor.

EW: Yeah. You make them big.

PK: And also the fact that -- they're enigmatic -- people aren't exactly sure what's back there. And so he is finally viewed as a conceptual artist, that these works -- you're not going to judge him on the basis of how carefully they're painted, because somebody who went to Art Center school is going to be able to do at least as good, if not better.

EW: Yeah. Who's the pop artist that, who wrote the cartoons?

PK: Roy Lichtenstein.

EW: Well, his -- this is what I hear -- I don't know if it's true or not. But his children said, "Daddy, ... daddy, why don't you do something for me?" And he made the cartoony things and blew them up for his children. Now, I don't know if that's true.

PK: Well, hey, you know, this is the way things happen in the world. And then all of a sudden he maybe saw something there that he developed and . . .

EW: Right. Who was it said the other day, it's by accident, chance?

PK: I don't know who said it, but that's pretty much the truth, isn't it?

EW: Somebody. Or did you mention that? No. Some artist.

PK: Oh, well. That's [all] on the school business. There's so many wonderful stories you have to tell. And I would like to sit down and talk about some of the parties, some of the evenings up here and so forth and so on. But we can't do it right now.

EW: We can do it when you come back.

PK: Right.

EW: Because I'm worn out.

PK: Yeah, I know, we're worn out. But I just, for wrapping up here, I'm wondering if you could give kind of an overview, your overall impression of the importance or lack of importance of the art schools that you were associated with to the development of art here in California? How important do you really think they were?

EW: My teaching?

PK: Well, I don't mean you personally. I mean, the schools themselves here. And if there was anything that you could describe that was different about the way the schools operated here and how they affected the younger artists and the whole art scene? Were they a major important part of art here?

EW: I'd say now they're a major important part of what the student is doing with the conceptual and the performance and all that. It's perfect now for that. But I don't -- Wingo had just left Chouinard, or Otis, rather. He quit. That they didn't want him to teach drawing anymore.

PK: Well, does that mean they don't want anybody to teach drawing? Or they don't want Wingo to teach drawing?

EW: As Wingo tells it there's nobody teaching -- there's someone teaching drawing that doesn't know how to draw themselves.

PK: So do you think that there's a whole different concept or definition of drawing that's developing?

EW: I think so. I feel . . .

PK: Now that's very interesting.

EW: I feel that very much. If I go there they don't set up a model. Necessarily, to be a good drawer, you don't have to necessarily draw a model, you draw something. They're probably doing what I do there. Psychic automatism.

PK: Surrealism.

EW: Yeah.

PK: Well, what about the days when -- you knew Sam Clayberger, your neighbor [Mt. Washington], at Otis?

EW: He was very conservative.

PK: Yeah. And Sam and I, as you know, Sam and I have been friends for many years and I remember when I first met him he was teaching at Otis already. And he also worked at J. Ward, I think, doing the cartoon stuff.

EW: Yeah.

PK: So the skill, that particular skill had different applications.

EW: Yeah.

PK: But how important was drawing at Otis at that particular time? To engage -- I mean, obviously there was some importance . . .

EW: Very important.

PK: Very important. It was valued?

EW: Yeah. They had two or three, four people teaching drawing. Now if they have one I don't know what he's teaching. Wingo's gone. So they first took Wingo and took him out of fine arts and put him in illustration.

PK: My, my. What a different idea.

EW: Yeah.

PK: So what's going to happen to the poor models?

EW: They have a harder time.

PK: There's not going to be any work if the art schools behave this way.

EW: No. Now, UCLA, I think, is, as I recall, they have a studied kind of curriculum, I think, of drawing and painting.

PK: I think even Lari Pittman actually believes in that quite thoroughly.

EW: Yeah, I think he does. Yeah.

PK: He went to CalArts though.

EW: Did he?

PK: And I think Lee Mullican, he studied with Lee Mullican and then Lee Mullican told him to go to CalArts. That's what Pittman said in his speech -- you know, a little appreciation he gave at Lee's memorial service [at UCLA].

EW: Yeah. Roy and [inaudible], he -- I don't know how he's teaching, he took over when I left. He's head of the master program. And I don't know what they're doing there now. But he does very interesting collages, Roy does.

PK: Well, there are different ways to do things. Well, I think that, as you say, we've done a good piece of work. And we're both probably ready for a little rest.

EW: Yeah.

PK: But I want to thank you for this. And we'll do more. And I appreciate your giving a little more time than I had planned. But it just seems that we got going.

EW: Yeah.

PK: So we'll look forward to another session.

EW: When you come back.

PK: Okay, Emerson, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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