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Oral history interview with Kristin Leachman,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Kristin Leachman on December 10, 2002. The interview took place in Pasadena, CA, and was conducted by Paul J. Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, an interview with artist Kristin Leachman, on December 10, 2002, at her studio in Pasadena. The interviewer is Paul Karlstrom. And this is Tape 1, Side A. So, Kristin, here we have an opportunity to talk about some things that we've talked about anyway over the past couple years. And you just reminded me you are 36 years old which is just a mark that points to what will be one of the things, purposes of this interview, that is, to get on record—you can't speak for your generation, of course, entirely, but you've had a certain experience that is perhaps representative in 2002 right now. Most of the archives are the older artists whose careers, in many cases, go well back in the twentieth century. So this is what I would like to pursue in this necessarily somewhat brief interview, and various topics will come up underneath that. And then there's another thing, [inaudible] more of an individual feature of your experience, and that is you lived and worked in Pasadena, lived in the Los Angeles area for, what, 10 years?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Fourteen.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Fourteen, okay. And hailing from the East, we'll talk about art school, one of the subjects. But you're in a very good position to talk about this place from an eastern perspective. And I just want to make sure that we remember to do that because, again, we've talked about that whole subject, this place as a special place in your work. Why don't we start out, after that long introduction, by telling us a little bit about your own background, where you were born, where you grew up, and some of the flavor and the circumstances of your earlier years.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Well, I grew up in Virginia, in rural Virginia, on a farm near my parents' lumberyard, which was in an interesting town. It had a lot of great characters. Both my parents come from huge families, my mother from Connecticut, my father from Virginia, and there were lots of musicians in his family. There were no fine artists, though, but I did have a very good art teacher in elementary school who kind of kick-started things for me. She definitely saw that I was very interested in art and allowed me to make naked clay figures. That's what I did all through elementary school, spending time with her making all these naked, little creatures. And then I was sent away to an all-girls boarding school.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was that because you were making naked, little creatures?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Maybe. And then at the all-girls boarding school, I had a really good art teacher there and a good art history teacher too. So that's really what I did, and what I focused on.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you remember the names of any of these?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Yes, Walter Warren and—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Walter Warren?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Yes, and Chow Hemingway.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Chow?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: And Chow Hemingway was—I think in her mid-'70s. She was really into art history and fantastic. I guess it was probably my sophomore year, she took our class to the opening of I.M. Pei East Wing at the National Gallery. So I remember we drove down there on this dilapidated bus, all these girls, and we walked in and it was incredible. And I think that was the first experience I had with contemporary art. You walk in, the space is huge, *The Woman*, that incredible tapestry Miro did in the front hall, and the Calder's and Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross* and the Matisse cutouts; it was all pretty inspired.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So would you mark that event, that visit to the National Gallery, as a moment, not to say—

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Yes, absolutely, a light-bulb moment, absolutely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: An epiphany, sort of.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Definitely. And both of those women were incredibly supportive and they saw to it that I got out of Virginia and that I go to art school. So they were extremely supportive and helpful with doing that. And at this point, my father had died. My mother was running the business for herself and by herself, and that was really important because it was great to have a role model of a woman taking care of business and being independent. So I think those two things were extremely important, and propelled me from this very rural setting to another possibility.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So what—you had an epiphany. You decided you wanted to be an artist.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Well I'd already wanted to be. I think what happened, though, is I didn't see how it related to present day. My art history was, for the most part, the Renaissance, the Egyptians, and all that. There wasn't anything really new introduced there. I had been around writers and artists, but no one who was a professional. When you see that whole group at the National Gallery, they were really doing it as a life. And so I began to sort of investigate those people.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did you choose—before we get you to art school, the first question. What did you imagine the art life to be?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Well I was always—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you have a picture, image of—

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Absolutely. I was always attracted to the eccentrics where I grew up, "kooks". And my parents were very interested in them. And it's the way they lived that interested me more than, say, friends whose families might have been in insurance or something more practical.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: So I envisioned it to be other and exciting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well I'll ask you later if you thought that indeed is the case. But how did you choose Rhode Island School of Design?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Well, it was supposed to be the best. And I went and looked for myself. We drove all around and looked at all these different art schools on the East Coast, and Chicago Art Institute because my aunt lived nearby. And it was just in terms of its campus and everything, it just seemed to offer a lot more. It seemed also academically a little more invested than the other schools. There were more requirements for English and other types of classroom stuff, so that was great because the other schools, a lot of them were just plain studio art and a little bit of art history, and then being so close to Brown, so you could take classes there, they were all interchangeable. That was great, too.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you were registered in one, but did it work both ways? Did Brown students come take a studio class?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: And a lot of the Brown students whose parents were a little freaked out about the idea of sending their child to art school went to Brown to actually go to RISD. And this was the case of a lot of people I met. They really wanted to be an animator, but they were extremely smart, academically. So they went to Brown, got credit for all of that, and majored in animation through their classroom and stuff at RISD

PAUL KARLSTROM: How do—well, this is something, of course, one can find out in different ways, but that is really interesting that, one, each institution used the other to basically complement and expand their offerings, their programs. How do you suppose that came about? Did you ever—was it anything that you were ever interested in? Did you see it as unusual or it was just that's the way it was?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: They were so intertwined; the campuses were so intertwined—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, they were right by one another.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: They were literally physically touching and sometimes interlocking, crossing the lines with different buildings. So I don't see how they could have avoided it. I mean there were definitely a lot of people at Brown that were not interested in RISD and a little scared of it. But the enlightened people, the film makers, the art majors, they all embraced it. And the schools embraced each other. And they sort of had to. They're all up on this hill in the small city which, at the time, was pretty run down and, subsequently, it's all been revamped.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well tell me about the art-school years. Tell me about RISD. You have a number of years that have been removed from that now. When you went in, you didn't know anything other. It probably was

pretty exciting being away from home, that kind of environment. But now you have a professional life, the art life. You've also got other things maybe you could tell us about in a moment. But from this perspective, how do you view that experience in terms of serving your interests as an artist, wanting to be a fine artist?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Well, I went there. It was perceived as a pretty wild thing to do. I think that my mother got a lot of questions, but most kids stayed in Virginia, went to U.V.A. or something in the area. So I go away and it was pretty fabulous because for the first time I wasn't like the freaky kid. There were all the freaks from high school. We were all there together and it was extremely nice in that way. And they—for the most part though, were all from the New England, Jersey, Massachusetts, New York areas, very suburban/urban upbringings. So I was still a little bit removed because I was from a southern state, and lived and grew up in a rural setting. There was a little bit of like "I can't quite relate to you," but the art sort of was able to rule out in the end. But also a lot of those kids were really ready to work which was great because I had definitely had the beers and had the boyfriends and I was also ready to get down and make something interesting happen. And so that was great. It was pretty serious, the setting. There was a lot of demands on you and your time and, for the most part, I really saw my generation stepping up to the plate and doing the work, which was great, because a lot of kids go away for the first time and they go wild for a few years. And then all of a sudden it's senior year and they're trying to figure out what they're going to do. Whereas, these kids had to decide sophomore year what their major was going to be and they had all these requirements and they did it, so that was great.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So in some ways, it sounds on a scale of academic content, that RISD was fairly high. I'm thinking of comparing to a few other schools.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: It was. You had to have good SAT scores to get in there. They wanted people who could think in other ways, not just draw.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so I guess what I touched on the comparison would be the San Francisco Art Institute which had a completely Bohemian avant-garde image where you go there to live the Bohemian lifestyle and practice the avant-garde. From what you say, RISD sounds actually like a different kind of art-school program, right?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: I think so. I do think these things change year-to-year, generation-to-generation. I mean at the point I was there, the whole hippie-beat wave. There was a little bit of that there, but Ronald Reagan was President. It was becoming expensive to go there and things were shifting, and you could feel the shift there. I felt like we were the last hoorah before it really went big time. They had this old, junky bookstore. By my senior year, they had a bookstore that looked like Macy's. So there was definitely more money rolling in.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So when did you graduate from there?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: I graduated in '88.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So that was long after the Talking Heads, the New Wave band, before then?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That must have been really funky and interesting and experimental.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: But much smaller, too. It just got bigger; the student body population was starting to grow.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because they [Talking Heads] were out there in the early '70s and '80s.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Yes, mid-'70s.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It sounds to me as if in the program there, there was a valuing of ideas, you know. I was thinking of critical thinking as—and perhaps writing and reading as important to make a good artist. Did you feel that that was—did you get the sense that that was, a conscious element in forming a program?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: I think so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Intellectual approach?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: I definitely think that the liberal arts was big, but I didn't feel like there was a real crossover. It was kind of like liberal arts, you did that, and then there were the studio art teachers. There wasn't a lot of mixing of the two. And there were definitely two camps of teachers. There was one that really wanted you to start thinking and questioning. And then there's the other that just wanted you to learn how to draw something or paint something and make the apple look like an apple. And so those two camps also in the fine-art department kind of conflicted and you can sort of sense it going from different classes. They just sort of didn't quite see eye-to-eye. But I guess that happens in all schools—just different personality conflicts and

things.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So do you feel that RISD was advertising itself, promoting itself as a school of design, as a design school? In other words, with that commercial emphasis, learning skills that enable you to go out in the market, the job market? Was that an important part or did the fine arts—in other words, the balance between art for art sake to make it like you do, making paintings and showing them in galleries—and trying to get them into museums.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did you feel about that? Did they co-exist?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Well it was so interesting because the teachers in the painting department—I mean I can really only speak to the painting department. The commercial arts, the graphic design and the fashion design, those kids were getting internships. They were going right into the job market, but, of course, it was a little more abstract to us, as to what our future would be. So, the painting department actually got a lot of interesting artists from New York to come up on the train to spend time and do workshops, spend weeks there, give lectures. And that was incredible because it was the '80s art boom and they all came; Eric Fischl, David Salle, Elizabeth Murray, Susan Rothenberg, Terry Winters. I mean they all came. They all talked. It was great. But the faculty, for the most part, that I had during my time did not have New York galleries. And I think that's really different to the way the LA art schools are set up. The LA art schools are filled with very famous faculty members. And for the most part, I don't think you would know anybody who taught me painting there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about your friend?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Richard Merkin. He's fabulous, but he's gotten very well known mainly for his work as a *New Yorker* artist, which is really more in illustration. He taught both in the illustration department and the painting department. And then I had Stewart Diamond who shows at David McKee, but there was definitely no John Baldessari there and that was interesting because I think there were several of us who really did want to make a life with this and you got a lot of their stuff. I mean these were sort of, for the most part, frustrated painters and they were lovely people and there were really great discussions and things, but professionally, they were all a bit stifled, I felt.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What Stewart is that?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Diamond. Stewart Diamond lived in New York and came up every week. He had David McKee Gallery which is exceptional; it's a great gallery! So I think he felt more fulfilled, so, therefore, more generous with his encouragements.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So Merkin, who indeed has become highly visible in his illustrations, but you can't call them fine art, I guess, but his illustrations are all over the place where he's got a signature style that is totally recognizable. But I gather from what you said that within RISD context, I mean he, himself—maybe you don't know this—but would like to think of himself as a fine artist and painter so that would be the way he would, say, interact with the students. I guess what I'm asking about is the type of hierarchy. Was that hierarchy evident in attitudes within the school? The true artist gives you the romantic idea of striking out on your own?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Well there were definitely types who I think like to see themselves like that. I think Merkin was a rebel. He was a bit of an outlaw. They didn't know what to make of him. He has one of the largest collections of Victorian erotic photography. He made that very well known. And I just think they didn't quite know what to make of him. He just tweaked the system, but he was a great drawing teacher, a very dynamic man, and you've got to applaud anyone who can come day after day and infuse the situation with some enthusiasm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you've kind of kept up with him, right? You were friends?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And do I remember that you had a studio near his? What was the—I thought that you said that. No?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: No, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Students had their own special studios?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Senior year, if you're a painting major, you have your own space, your own studio. They give you one on campus. It's tiny. And he would come up for the week and then go back on the train. He lived in New York.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So he didn't have a studio there actually?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: No, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Any other famous friends that went to RISD? Actually, what about some of the other ones?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: I had this other teacher who was in painting, Al Wunderlich. He was part of the whole beat, New-York scene and friends with Yoko Ono and Yayoi Kusama. And he was extremely interesting. He was another one. The painting establishment there didn't quite know what to make of him. But all of these people really interested me. He was extraordinary and really out there and friends with Timothy Leary and just really getting you to push and to think and question the universe, and that was really important.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you feel that the way these—several faculty mentioned were conducting their lives or appeared to be, did you feel an affinity? Did that match how you saw yourself even way back when you were younger, felt like an oddball out of step, out of—did you identify in that way?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: I mean definitely meeting Richard Merkin made me want to be a painting major. So when I was undecided and sort of going and looking around at what different departments offered, there he was with his purple tennis shoes and orange tie and just looking very exciting. And I don't know, it just seemed so much more exotic to be around those people than it did to be around the graphic design world.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about—you mentioned these really interesting artists would come up from New York and give talks and, I don't know, maybe tutorials. I don't know what they did. But I seem to remember that you and some friend of yours were, at one time, involved in that process of picking them up at the airport, the train. Is that so?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you have any good stories?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: We picked them all up. It was interesting because some of them wanted to come and share and then some of them were just sort of doing it. I remember I picked up Eric Fischl and he was extremely grouchy and he didn't really want to be there. And so I took him to my studio and we had lunch and he was going to give a lecture that afternoon and he kind of sat there and told me how hard it was to be a woman artist and make it in the world and all of this stuff. And so you had that. And then you had people like Philip Taaffe who came and were extremely supportive of what I was trying to do. And all of that feedback was great. And then there was Elizabeth Murray who was juggling three kids and this huge career and it was just really important to see them and talk to them about all their lives. But the other people that came up were critics and one was Suzi Gablik and I remember I took her in to the art studio. There was this big painting class and everything and we left and she said, "a lot of those kids are missing the boat. They're in there painting apples and oranges and the boat is off at sea and they're not on it." And she was really pretty harsh about the way in which RISD was going about teaching its painting majors. That was interesting. Gary Indiana came up and he also was kind of rocking the boat and questioning the whole way things were there, which is great. And perhaps that's why people wanted them to come up, to sort of shake things up. It was good to see and hear.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well I imagine part of it was to provide contact then with the real art world, the adult art world, professional. And that seems like a good program. So what happened next?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Well you've got to know one thing that's so interesting is that all of the people that came, all the lectures that were given, all the courses in the contemporary art scene of America and all the surveys, there was never even a mention of California. It might as well have been Portugal. They did not acknowledge it in any way. Sam Francis was mentioned once,—and it was also very interesting because David Salle and Ross Bleckner, these people who had gone to Cal Arts all came and, of course, they would talk about their graduate school experiences. And they all mentioned John Baldessari. And so it was interesting [inaudible] like "Who's John Baldessari?" And they would all just mention him as "Oh, this wonderful teacher they had and he's back out in the desert in California." They just made it all—their whole Cal Arts experience, they made it sound like they were at some Wild-West show in cactus country, but they all moved back to New York after. None of them stayed there, obviously.

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PAUL KARLSTROM: Continuing the interview with Kristin Leachman on December 10th. This is Tape 1, Side B. And you had just made mention or made note of the fact that when these famous Cal Arts products [graduates]—in New York, by this time, came to RISD to talk they were like the only ones who would make any mention of the art world on the West Coast, specifically in California.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: It wasn't in art world they were mentioning; it was an in art school.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes. And it's sort of hard to believe that they were so unaware of their colleagues. But, of course, an art school is an insular situation, certainly CalArts, you know. And why they stuck it there, Disney had a lot of land, so that's why it's out in Valencia. But it's true they all left, and, of course, Baldessari now takes pride in the fact that many of his students from UCLA and so forth actually do hang around for a while. Whether or not that's true, I'm not sure.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Of course that's true.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I do think there were more hanging around just—because Fischl and so forth didn't stay.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: No. I think there were more hanging around especially ones that were from California, but now they're hanging around because they can't afford to move to New York. There's a big difference.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And besides they get a lot of attention. They get an amazing amount of press; it's fairly unusual. But to reiterate then, even in the case of these artists who were famous by then, they're also famous as CalArts students. See, I remember these times and CalArts was the reason they went there and your sense was that—one of the biggest reasons was Baldessari. Is that right?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: I don't know why they went there. I just remember that when they got there, Baldessari was definitely their mentor.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now did you—that's, of course, an old kind of system, mentoring system, whether it's formal or informal. I didn't ask that about RISD. How did that work? Did you—did the fine arts students especially be seeming to attach themselves to an individual teacher, a mentor?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Not so much in the painting department because I do think this whole kind of careerist mentality was starting to kick in there and people really wanted someone who could help them. And because a lot of these teachers did not have galleries, they really weren't in a position to help versus the West Coast where all of them have galleries and have been extremely pivotal as far as getting students and making the introductions to get them representation. So I would say that people were supportive of the students. The teachers were supportive, but, for the most part, it was kind of a you're-on-your-own situation. And then there was also conceptualism, which was huge. And for me, I was more interested in painting my own emotional history, so my paintings looked very different from theirs. And there was some support for my work with the faculty, obviously Richard Merkin who we spoke about, and Stewart Diamond who just said, "These are great and keep going," and he was very encouraging. But as paintings, they were very outsider. They were "kooky". And they didn't sort of fit into this cool, hip kind of category, which everyone was trying to fit into. So there's that. But there's also a graduate program there and that was interesting 'cause I got to see what that was all about. And so when I finally graduated from RISD, I was able to just think about all that and decide where I wanted to go next and I wanted to get a master's. And one teacher said, "Why do you need it in painting?" You know what this is about and it's just going to be sort of more of the same, but frankly, with a lot less structure, just a lot more time on your own." He's like, "You can do that yourself." So that's when I was taking classes in film and decided that I would pursue that. And so I applied to American Film Institute and the production-design teacher there, which is the department I applied for, was Robert Boyle who was, at the time, in probably his early to mid '70s. He was Hitchcock's designer, and so the combination of studying with him and moving to California was—sounded right, so I did it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So having heard almost nothing about an art world in California, according to your account, what was the draw? Was it the proximity to film which, of course, is Hollywood and the "industry"? Was it that draw that all of a sudden "Aha, that's one of the places to be"? Or were there other things about California, the idea of going to California that appealed to you?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: I think all of that. I think I thought it was big enough where if I wanted to make art again, it could probably help in that way. There was enough support here when I started to research the art world and ask questions and I was going to the library and getting out books on California. There were Ed Ruscha books, and there was all this stuff about others. So there's something going on there. And, if not, I would move back to New York. But I think for me after four years of studio art and all of the requirements that go with that, I was really ready for something a little more exciting and a change because the whole New England way was too kind of conceal everything. And that wasn't what I was into. So California just seemed so expansive and exciting and warm, a place that could sort of soothe me better. It would be a better match.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you hadn't been so this is all—

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Never been to California.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —your projection, your—

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Oh, absolutely. My whole like fantasy of what it was. And people kept saying to me, "It's really not like that." And I kept saying, "How do you know? You've only lived in Massachusetts." But everyone was trying to kind of warn me that Greta Garbo was dead and it did not look like the movies and that I was in for a shock. I didn't care, though. I didn't care. I really wanted to believe the fantasy that I had in my head about it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was the fantasy? Was it all Hollywood-type fantasy?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: It was all—it was really interesting because it sort of was this morphing of all the books that I have had and you read about LA. I had this Hollywood book. I had a book on Charles Eames, so I had this vision of living with a lot of glass and "kooky" metal material, and swimming every day in this incredible ocean—of course, when I came here, I almost froze swimming in the middle of August. I was completely frozen and—but yes, I had this vision of it and all the palm trees and all the possibility. The dream was alive.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it was, to a certain degree, sexualist?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Definitely. It seemed sexy and I had never lived in a sexy place. I lived in Virginia where, every home was built in the 1700's or the 1600's. Everything was historic to the point.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Everything was dead.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Everything was dead. Everything was about the Civil War still. And it's very interesting, but it's certainly not sexy or sensual. And then you go to Rhode Island, it was kind of more of the same, this old factory town. All the textile mills were there and that also seemed really kind of dead but interesting. And all kind of an off-shoot of New York, right, and New York seemed really nice, but I don't know, a little bit hidden and cold to me. And, of course, with the art world, there are the great museums and everything, but it just, I don't know, it didn't feel alive to me in the way that I wanted it to be. So I put it all on California, that that's where it was, all this life that I was searching for.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So when did you make the move?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: So I made the move about a month after I left RISD, I graduated from RISD in 1988. I applied to AFI [American Film Institute]. The head of the film department at RISD gave me a very good recommendation. I got in and I was one of five production-design fellows there. Basically, you did a lot of work with Bob Boyle and you designed shorts for all the different directing fellows and there were cinematographers and producers and screen writers and—but extremely different. A lot of these people were in their 30s. I was 22. They had had careers doing commercials or underground films and really wanted a big Hollywood career. And this was supposed to be where they'd get it. It was a very prestigious time and it had a lot of support from the Hollywood community, but it was certainly not "arty" in the way that I was used to it. So that was a big transition. Now there definitely were eccentrics there, but a film eccentric is very different than a painting or sculpting eccentric.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Tell me how so.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: They're much—first of all, they look much more conservative and they have to work so collaboratively with different people that they sort of become more democratic and they're—I don't know. You didn't feel the sense of individuality the way you did in an art school when each person is kind of out for their own vision, because they had to deal with the screenwriter and the producer, and the cinematographer. They had to learn all these different trades. They had to learn how to work with all different types of people and I just think it made them much more kind of rounded and even, for the most part. But that was another school where I came after the whole David Lynch, Zwick Brothers, that whole group who really became very successful.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you were too late again.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Again too late to the party.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that the story of your life?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Absolutely the story of my life, just kind of making it into the party for the last 15 minutes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Before talking about the AFI and then actually going to work in the film industry, what about that? 'Cause I don't want to miss this, the feeling that, by accident of date of birth, that you were always a little bit late, as you say. You know, you arrive at the last few minutes of the party. But in a bigger sense, how do you describe that? How do you explain that? What conclusions would you draw about what was going on during your time and then what has been going on recently compared to the earlier times. Of course, I think back to

the '60s, but maybe that's done. Maybe you're talking more about the '70s. I'm just curious.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Right. I was born in '66. It was LBJ, right? But when I was conscious, it was Gerald Ford. Now I just think that says it right there. I never really had an exciting president. There was never that feeling of extreme hope in the air during any of the last three decades that I've been around. And we've all sort of had to get on with it and make the best of it. But there's always been the sense with my generation of making the best of it, that it's not as good as our parents and that it's not as good as our grandparents, we've had no great war.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well could have.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Well yes, maybe. The jury's still out. There hasn't been any kind of unifying force. There hasn't been '60s or '40s or these periods that really brought Americans together. And that's been kind of interesting to work around 'cause you've almost had to really kind of separate it out and not let it get to you, at least for me, not get negative. You know what it was like when things were a little more interesting and diverse and liberal. And you have something to compare it to. We really don't. I think my generation has gotten sort of cynical about that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How so? I mean specifically how so cynical?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Well that we're tired of hearing how great it was. We're tired of hearing what we missed. What about now? I know that at AFI for Bob Boyle, I mean when you work with Hitchcock who was such an extremely visual director, how is anyone going to match that? And they never did for him. So he was pretty disappointed with his career after that. How is anything going to be as good as that? So it takes a special kind of creative presence to get over that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That, of course, this is interesting. It's a little bit complicated because it seems to me you're talking about several things, at least two things. One is that it's a broader view of the historical moments in terms of the society or world events and providing some, as you said, a unifying force. But you're also talking specifically about how it seemed to be an accidental thing, about how rarely great artists, great directors come along, but, of course, you can only work with them when they're around, which is nothing—

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Hitchcock is like a Kennedy. It's just a bigger venue, but how could anyone compare to him and the sort of idealism that was created around him? They can't. It set a tone. It created something that was sort of squashed and never regained.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So did you guys talk about this like at RISD and then maybe afterwards say "Well what's with this? What's going on? Where is everybody? Where are they? There's all this older group that seem to reap the benefits which is pretty accidental in terms of timing.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Well it's luck, right?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes. But do you feel this is a pretty prevalent view? You guys talk about this.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Absolutely, absolutely. I mean it's hard not to talk about it when you go into a painting class and your teacher tells you that painting is dead.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. Okay. Well you then went to AFI. How long was that program?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Well, I actually spent almost two years there, but the second year was making a film and it was kind of on and off, so it really was about prepping for the film and designing it. And then you had to wait until it actually was cut and came out, so it was another two years before you could graduate. It had to be screened. And a lot of people were not directing-wise, were not selected, so it ended up being only four, five directors in my class that graduated, and then with that only four or five cinematographers and only four or five production designers. So you didn't get in to second year unless your guy was picked.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's not fair.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: At all, at all. But luckily, my guy was not only picked, he then made a film which was about apartheid and it was so fabulous, the timing, because it came out right when Nelson Mandela got out of jail in South Africa. So it was perfect. And then it was nominated for a best short subject Oscar. But, of course, I didn't get to go because he took his ex-wife, and the producer took his girlfriend, so the cinematographer and I sat at home.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So who was the cinematographer?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: The cinematographer was a guy named Wally Pfister and he recently shot an interesting film.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you really did make a big shift, though. I mean you became very immersed in the industry, as they call it, in Hollywood, the film industry, for a period of time. During that time, what about the painting life? I mean did you sort of abandon that or did it hover in the background waiting and it said, "Hey, hey, what about me?"

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: I was making things in my little apartment. I was making things, but just things for myself—nothing that I thought I would show.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What were they like?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: They were assemblage-type pieces and, again—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not those huge—

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: No. They were all very little and painted and boxy and just dealing with my own emotional world which was something I definitely wasn't dealing with making films. But it was the film—I cannot even express to you how the film community was so time-consuming. I absolutely never had a break. And what happened as soon after my first year, I started immediately working. The second year I was doing film, I was also working on films and sort of fitting it in around it. And then I got into the Set Design Unit, and then I was really swamped and working all the time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you have this professional life making films. How long did that continue? Was there a point where—how did that then evolve, develop? Because now, of course, you have a very different life and it's all this stuff having to do with that except you went through marriage, I guess, and friends. How did that develop? Because I know that you then got a studio downtown.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: So I started working on a lot of films. I was working on big studio-budgeted films for Fox and Warner Brothers primarily. And it was interesting, I definitely found through all of that work the Hollywood that I thought was here. The lots were extremely interesting. There were a lot of different crafts people making cactus, making fake facades and all of that. That was interesting, and the work was pretty good. They gave me my own golf cart. I zoomed around and sort of oversaw construction of different projects. It was fun. It was a lot of fun! And all the people that I met were nice and hard-working, but ultimately, I wanted to direct and write and produce and star in my own movie and make my own world.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Film auteur like Woody Allen.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Yes. I definitely did not want to be creating someone else's dream. So I started to make the time in the week to start exploring the whole LA art world and to see if that might be a viable thing to segue into. So I remember friends said, "Oh, there's this great opening. Let's go." So we went to the old L.A. Louvre and it was William T. Wiley and it was a really rainy night and nobody came. And so we just sat there with all this wine and William T. Wiley and talked to him. And he was great, just—I don't know. There was some sort of accessibility to it all. And I thought wow, if this is one of the most prestigious galleries and I can sit here and drink Chard with this fabulous, old artist, then it seems like a pretty cool place, pretty cool scene to be a part of.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What did Wiley say to you? You said that you had gone to art school and you were a painter.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: I was working in Hollywood and he said, "Oh, Jesus, with all the bull-shitters." And I said, "Yes." And he's like, "Oh, God, get out of there." But I couldn't believe his work, because he's definitely so West Coast, all the pencil and paint combinations. It seemed so free. And that's something I didn't see with all those Leo Castelli guys, Mary Boone people. I didn't see the lack of caring of how it ended up looking. He did not need it to be super-polished and corporate-looking. The Mike Ovitz kind of "take" on it all. He wasn't appealing to that crowd. He was appealing, primarily first to himself and his own soulful needs and not to the look.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Had you heard of [William] Wiley before?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Never heard of him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because we always understood that at one time, I'm not sure, I think it was maybe in the '70s, he was like national and was influential. His style was very, very influential.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Really.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes. Everybody was doing cartoons and stuff of his students. And, of course, his most famous student, I suppose, was Bruce Nauman. And so there was a whole world going on there. It strikes me as highly parochial, the situation that you had at RISD because UC Davis in the early '70s, especially '60s and so forth, was like a premier art school having major people—but, of course, they were Californians.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But conceptualism itself, was incubated a little bit there with Nauman and Wiley and then others. And it just strikes me as interesting that that was kind of lost in terms of East Coast awareness, as you describe it, right?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Absolutely. So then what ended up happening is that I was able to finally graduate from A.F.I. The film was screened. It did really well. I have to say the design was incredible. It looked like South Africa. Through all the location scouting and everything, we really pulled it together. And at graduation, I ended up winning a lot of money with this Franklin Schaffner Fellowship. I won for undergrad and David Lynch won for the alumni. They had two categories.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So did you get to meet him?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Well I met him eventually because they had some party for us and everything at the Beverly Hilton or something. So anyway, the timing was so fabulous, my friend, Cindy Bennett had just discovered this great studio space in the produce market downtown. And I said, "I'd just like to get this money and get a studio." And she said, "Just do it; just screw Hollywood. Just do it."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Who said that?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: My friend Cindy. And so I did and we went down there. We both signed really cheap leases and we got this space. It was very undesirable. There was no elevator, very hard. It's very difficult to park. It smelled really bad because of all the rotting produce. But we didn't care.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You thought that was romantic?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Oh, I thought it was incredible. The view was of the San Gabriel Mountains and you got to look down on orange trucks and watermelon trucks and this great stuff all day and these wonderful Latin men.

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PAUL KARLSTROM: Continuing this December 10, 2002, interview with artist Kristin Leachman in her studio. This is Tape 2, Side A. And we were enjoying the description of this wonderful studio you found downtown, but you were saying it had views of the San Gabriel Mountains. That's interesting because you ended up closer to Pasadena. But it sounds to me like this was a moment where you really acknowledging, "Wait a minute, this is really where I belong," correct?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Yes. And I started turning down films, just sort of slowly pulling out of all of that, which was hard. I built up a huge amount of contacts and it was hard because some of these were friends, but it was easy work-wise because I really wanted to make paintings again. So I did. I started to make them. I sort of picked up where I left off at RISD, kind of not knowing where I'd want to take it. And soon after I got the studio, Helter Skelter opened at MOCA, which is now called The Geffen Contemporary in Little Tokyo which was five blocks from my studio. And I got some friends and we all went. I had no idea what to expect. I had really never seen any of these artists' works. And we walked in, and there was Chris Burdens' giant Medusa head. And I was absolutely floored! The whole place was packed with such diversity and so much art that I believed in and that pushed the boundaries of what I had seen on the East Coast. It was a real awakening for me, an eye-opener to what was really out here. I think probably one of the best surveys of contemporary California art that I've seen. It was a tremendously inspired show and hard to forget.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Chris Burden.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Chris Burden, Nancy Rubins, Llyn Foulkes, Paul McCarthy, Lari Pittman, just everybody was in there. Your friend, the cartoon guy, was in there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, oh, Williams.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Yes, Robert Williams.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What did you think of Robert Williams?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: I thought it was so interesting that that work was in there with it. I remember it was in a room right next to Paul McCarthy's piece that he did on these men in the forest, you know the one?

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean the—

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Yeah, the man who loved the tree a little too much, that piece. And I was so excited by all

of it. And the Lari Pittman paintings, I'd never seen those. I'd never seen his work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mike Kelly in there?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Mike Kelly was in that. It was great. So then I remember I just sort of slowly figured out, "Okay, a lot of them showed at Rosamund Felsen." I started going to her gallery. I started going to shows at the LA Louvre. I started going to shows at Margo Levin, and slowly putting it all together. And soon after that, MOCA had a retrospective of Alexis Smith and that was a great show to see because that dealt with a lot of imagery that I was dealing with in my work, but she was doing it in such an interesting way, in such a conceptual way and with text and everything. That was great! And then there was a wonderful show of Vija Celmins. So it was a good time. The early '90s had a lot of great shows. Then I went down to Pepperdine, the Weisman Gallery, and Michael Zakian had put together a retrospective of Agnes Pelton who I'd never heard of and it was absolutely inspired. And I was so interested in the fact that she was working the same time as Georgia O'Keefe who, of course, being from the East Coast, you know a lot about. She was always discussed in our art history class, in reference to nature and art and everything and I thought it's interesting that they were both working at the same time, but Agnes Pelton chose to live a much more hidden life, private life, out in the desert in California. I love those works. And a friend of mine said, "Well if you love those, then you should go get this book I have, *Turning the Tide*, and that ended up being the catalog to a show that you—

PAUL KARLSTROM: At Santa Barbara, with Susan Ehrlich and Barry Heisler—

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: And so I got that book and that was great because Helter Skelter was one group, probably two generations. But then the *Turning the Tide* book was the two generations before them. Once I got a hold of that, I started going to Tobey Moss's Gallery on Beverly and looking up all those works that she had and kind of putting together the whole story of Los Angeles art, California art, and making sense of it, which was extremely exciting. It was great because I did feel like I had discovered all of this.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well you did. So what was your work like before this epiphany?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: So while this is all going on, I'm making work that was figurative, narrative. It was constructed out of wood, jigsawed images, dowelled off of grids, off the wall. And, again, as I had sort of started at RISD dealing with my own kind of emotional history, which then people read as the history of women; they had that kind of historical element to them. They were very personal and they were pretty illustrative and a little tortured and conflicted. Yes. They were very large. I made probably, oh, I don't know, probably a half a dozen of them and then I started to send my slides around. And a friend had recommended Newspace Gallery, so I sent them there and a couple other places and I had dealers coming in to look. And one day, Joni Gordon called me from Newspace and she said she'd like to come over. I found her to be one of the more articulate, intelligent people I had met and definitely who I'd had to visit and we hit it off. And she said, "I'd like to take a piece or two and put it in my back room and see what the response is." And she did that and the response was very good and the piece sold. And then she gave me a show of those works.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When was that?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: This is all like '95, I believe, around then. So I ended up making probably 12 of those pieces. They were very time-consuming. I only made a couple a year, so I did them for several years. I was actually using a room across the hall for free. They were kind enough to loan it to me and I had that as my woodshop. And the whole time was very liberating because here I am, a five-foot-so girl and I'm using all these power tools and I'm making all this stuff, it was very empowering. So I was very happy doing all of it, but there was this horrible fire at the liquor store underneath and it really burned up most of my space and some of my tools. Everything changed. No art, because all of it was at Joni's on view.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: So I then decided that it was time for a change, so I was really out looking to get inspired and explore another direction. And that's about the time that I saw the Agnes Pelton show and became interested in exploring all of that and finding out what that was about, the whole post-surrealist movement and that whole group. So I did that. And it helped shift my work. It helped kind of lift things, free them a little bit. And so then I started looking for something that would embody all the concerns that I had and I started to do these braided-striped paintings and then they kind of evolved and began to shift and change and open up. And I'm still dealing with that, but beginning to shift away from it a bit now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But what was it—it had to come from somewhere it seems to me, this change—in looking for something, as you said, to express a new perspective or supposedly discovering these other artists. How did you come—how would that lead to braiding imagery?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: I just started experimenting with it because they were all from those kind of hokey

American braided rugs. And it's definitely an object from my home as a kid, that I thought was really horribly ugly. So it was sort of the challenge of it. If I could take that and make something really interesting with it, take something that's kind of low-art craft and make something high art. Really, it just—I wasn't into the trickery of it or anything. I was just more interested in the possibility what it would present because people could relate to it. They knew where it was from, but then it had become transformed into other—

PAUL KARLSTROM: So what was it about the current experience here that made that possible? Was it a kind of identification with some of these other artists you admired? What was it in your own recollection about that that made it possible, this opening up and looking around, or was it the notion of hierarchy that's very much a part of this California/LA experience that makes it almost unique?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: But I think it's interesting. There's a lot of possibility here. You feel when you look at the work of Agnes Pelton or Henrietta Shore or Lorser Feitelson. You just feel the kind of "Let's give it a try. Why not?" Some of these artists get a little more regimented, but you think, "God, we're all the way out here." We don't have this pressure of rents that the New York crowd has. Why shouldn't we be trying things and taking risks. We have the freedom to do it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So this is kind of a validation of something that some of us almost take for granted. It's almost a cliché, as a matter of fact, what's distinctive, what distinguishes California art or West Coast. And usually, the response, generally, almost across-the-board is openness and freedom, and the fact that there seems to be less at stake, so why not. And I gather that was pretty much your experience.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Absolutely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you did these paintings. And then I should mention, as I was going to earlier that they were, obviously, successful paintings, you had several shows at Newspace.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: My present show there is my fifth.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Fifth? Well presumably, she [Joni Gordon] liked the paintings and they were successful. You became known for that. You got some good reviews and others took notice. Was there a temptation to just keep doing that, because they have evolved?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Yes, they've evolved. There is always a—I mean if something is successful for you, there's always temptation to keep it going. But at a certain point you need to keep reinventing yourself. And this is something I'm really very interested in at the moment because I've been in the *L.A. Times*. I've had reviews. I've had attention. I've sold to good collectors. I've had this whole experience and I acknowledge it and they acknowledged me. I appreciate all of it, but I need to see about other things. I could just keep doing this, and a lot of artists do. I see it. I see them kind of continuing a theme, a track, but I think ultimately it can't be so strategic. It's got to really be what you know about yourself and what you're telling yourself to do, how you're listening to your instincts. That's the most important thing. So right now, my instincts are telling me to go explore other things.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It seems to me that each change in your work, each new direction, reflects something very personal about you. At the very beginning, you talked about your—at RISD, it was your emotional life that was the basis for your art. And I gather that hasn't changed. What forms did that take? I mean does it represent changes in your life, a change in the work? Is there kind of almost that one-to-one relationship? These changes in your life are what's pushing the work. What's the connection?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: I think it's great. Obviously, after you have a show, there's a sense of the slate being wiped clean. A lot of people choose to deal with that by continuing on as if they hadn't had a show so that there's some consistency there. But it is an exciting time because there is kind of this endless possibility presented to you. But I'm very interested right now in world events and how they are affecting things. It's hard because there's all this focus on September 11 and what's going to happen to everything, including art and what impact it's had. So it's hard not to deal with that and acknowledge that in some way. And threat of war and all of these issues. I mean, what do you do, as an artist, ignore them and kind of continue with your own inner path, inner world? I don't know. I'm really questioning all of this myself right now. I mean for the most part, I don't know if people want to come and look at politically inspired art. You can see that on CNN. There's no real point in it for me. I don't want to go to a gallery and see that. I don't think that this whole event has hurt beauty or joy or hope. For me it hasn't, but obviously, it's hurt the universe in a way. It's wounded it. You feel it. So I don't know. I'm very interested in all of that in relation to art right now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But is there anything in the work that you've already produced that reflects those interests? Or is this something you're considering as a possibility for the future, to find a way to incorporate changes to reflect the insecurities, I suppose, that you recognize?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: I think it's tricky to know how you're supposed to maneuver through all of this. Is there supposed to be some acknowledgment of it in your work? Or are you supposed to try to get beyond it because you're an artist and you're supposed to kind of help lead ideas and things and people through it? I don't know what our role is. I have to say it's really shifted so much for me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, typically, your work, as far as I can tell, has been very personal, very individual.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Yes. It is very personal, but is it ignorant at a time like this to make it all about me?

PAUL KARLSTROM: I don't know how to answer that. Well, you're posing the question. Basically what you're saying, this is on your mind. But what about—I'm still interested in these changes. You've said this before, that the work responds to changes in your life or discoveries in your world, in part, you credit this place, California. Pasadena, the Crafts movement, this has been a part of your life as well that might seem, in some way, to point to craft relating to the way you paint. And when does one become too simple about these directions? But I'm curious how things that have changed and affected the work exactly in what way?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: It's not like I can go and point to it. It's sort of an evolution and I set out experimenting. I didn't really set out because something huge happened to me and it wasn't that big of a moment. I made a shift; I made a change to make paintings in this type of way, this type of structure, and I just went with that, and then went exploring in that context.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Personal issues that are of sexuality and especially, I think, gender. I don't believe that you're a self-described feminist artist, women's artist, but much of your subject content seems to point in that direction and, you now might have interest for women. So there it is. And also, some people see, especially in some of the recent work, a real sense of disguised sexuality, and how do you feel about that? Do you feel it just naturally comes out of you, these themes that are interpreted or understood in terms of gender and sexuality?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Well, because I paint something that primarily is an image created by females or if I paint a depiction of a woman's image or whatever, I don't really see that as feminist art. And let's face it, hetero male artists are not asked this. I mean people don't ask, "Oh, Ed Ruscha, you painted a gas station," "Are you getting in touch with your maleness?" because guys are supposed to like cars. I don't think that it's something I really am conscious of. If it comes out like that, so be it, but I do not sit around and kind of strategize on making "chick" paintings.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, no, and I didn't mean to suggest that, saying that. However it comes about, there are aspects of it, elements.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: There it is.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So that finally becomes the interesting question. It's not a strategy; it seems quite spontaneous then, naturally, for someone who believes in the purpose of her art is recording or expressing emotional life. So it is about the individual, about you. And I'm just curious about, that as your [inaudible] in the way you are a creative person. And also, sensuality and sexuality that you were attracted to, even as a kid, certainly you've talked earlier about – as being a little bit of an outsider and I inferred that that was part of being "outside" contributed to the attraction of California. So it's not a quest for that, but that is a part of a guiding force. And, well, you need to, if you can, sort of enlighten me on that. It does seem to be included as an aspect, maybe even formally to destabilize with a sensual and even sexual energy.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: How you're reading it. Well, you're touching on issues like things I struggle with which is how much of yourself do you actually show and how much do you hide. And if you're cool, you show very little of yourself. And that's been kind of the way of the world for a long time in this art community. There's been a lot of concealing of you, the human being. And we're now into the fourth generation of conceptual art in this community. So it gets pretty tricky when you're in that situation to be one of the ones who's kind of trying to say something about your experience or yourself and to make it personal and make it expressive and to not hide. I just go back and forth and I struggle with this and perhaps the struggle is now a part of the work and is kind of driving the work because every painting I make it's how much do I really want to let go of, and because it opens yourself up and you're much more vulnerable as an artist. I see why a lot of artists don't want to go there, but I do.

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PAUL KARLSTROM: We were talking about this tug-of-war, this impulse desire to reveal yourself, this emotional life, let's say, your secrets, and well, "reveal or conceal" as a theme. And I just wonder if there's some ways you agree with that, what does it mean to you, and what form does it take? Do you see this as a force, an important force in your creative activity?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: I think it's *the* force. I think that as I go along, I become more comfortable and less interested in the idea of being politically correct, of being "hip", of being popular. And it becomes a lot freer to just make art and take the risk. And who cares if there's an unequal balance of sentimentality in the piece and who cares if there's a lot of emotional content! Who cares if it's sensual or sexual; express it and put it out there and enjoy it. And quit trying to cover it up or make it palatable for people, which is what I felt myself doing. I think part of the reason everything is sort of moving now in my paintings is, I'm breaking away from the grid and everything being so regimented. That's been really important, and to use kind of hidden imagery within the pieces and make these kinds of fantasyscapes that really express my inner life and not feel bad about it. But somehow it isn't public enough or that I'm not being a good girl, right? Because I think right now there's a real kind of epidemic with being—making it right—making it commercial or something that would sell to the institution or to the gallery community. I don't know. I don't see as much of the human being involved, the humanistic qualities that I'm interested in. But there are people; there's a huge group of people now making work that seems very personal and that's great to see! That's great to see!

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you feel, obviously, part of that?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Yes, very much so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's something that you can acknowledge as the arena in which you operate.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Right. And I think for so many people, including myself, there's this quest of where do I fit in. And when it kind of gets "Okay, this is where I am. This is where my heart lies," then you can take a deep breath and feel a part of that community and that you're not alone, right? Because so much of this process is being alone and you need the support. You need the support of people with like minds and hearts. When you get that, I think it just even fuels the art further.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You talked about, you mentioned hidden images, and I gather that *hidden* is important. In other words, it becomes a question of how obvious do you want to be. What kind of thing are you talking about? What are some examples?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Well I've basically structured them like a landscape and I usually work on them left to right. And as I'm working, I'm drawing. As I'm painting them, I'm also creating kind of other things. And a lot of it is to amuse myself. And at the end of the day, the painting, if you can actually see that I have put a tree or a penis or a dog or whatever in it, it really doesn't matter to me. I'm more interested in the kind of feeling that you get. And it's interesting how I'll do it and people cannot go and point to it, but they feel it; they feel it. And so if one has maybe a lot of sexual imagery in it I'll get the response of "Wow! This painting feels so charged!" And that's always kind of amusing to me. And then on a large piece I just finished, then I would just—on a certain panel, I just came out and depicted certain images, so, again, either revealed or concealed. They're not ending. They're not in sort of this limbo state, and that interests me a lot.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So your goal in your art, however you would want to try and achieve it—what tools or methods you use—finally comes down to, seems to me, a belief or a need for you to be *you*, to be in your paintings. And that if that's not so, you're not achieving what's important.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which is certainly not like some of the chillier, detached, cynical work of conceptualism.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Right, because if you don't—this raises other important issues and things, but if you're not willing to do that, then you're also not putting yourself in a situation where you're going to be personally attacked for your own emotional doings. You may be creatively attacked because they don't like the way you put the painting together. But when you start putting personal imagery in there and then that gets critiqued, it just seems like you're a lot more vulnerable. You're more raw; you're out there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm tempted to want to get you to speculate about what this tells about our times, and I'm not sure that might be productive. But this need to be known, to be in the world, to be understood, to share—show the naughty parts as well as the nice. We are all naughty and nice but then the fear of being criticized or even rejected. Is this what you're talking about?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Oh absolutely! And I think that if you can—you've got to sort of figure out where you stand. I think there are a lot of naughty people that make really polite art and a lot of polite people that make very naughty art. And it's all about the balance of it and striking that and getting it right for yourself. But it's a hard world to be naughty in and it's a hard world to be a naughty woman in.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Although that seems to be changing big-time, especially in lesbian art.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Yes, to some degree.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Some of that's quite out there and they actually insist on the validity of this. Obviously, it's their life experience—identity. Most of the rest of us, though—well, I was going to say most of the rest of us don't have—many of the rest of us don't have to deal with that quite so prominently. But as a woman, why is it different as a woman? Does it tend to be ghettoized?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Well, right. And also that if you are an overt bad girl, does anyone really care? That's the other thing. Do they really care? I think what they care most about is that you tell them what you desire. I think that's interesting to people, what do you really desire? And it's not something I think a lot of women want to talk about publicly. I think if you ask them at a dinner party after a few glasses of wine, they probably would tell you, but it's a lot harder to do it in kind of a sober state in a painting for public consumption. It's very, very hard to do. I mean it's definitely something I'm striving to do, but it's not easy, but I have to get there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So I guess the last question on this, and generalizing to the extent that you can in terms of tendencies and trends within your generation and of this period, do you see what you describe as your own interests, expressive interests, expressive needs and goals as representing—not a kind of a school exactly but a prevalent direction in contemporary art and speaking pretty much of your peers. Do you generalize that much?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: I think it's so open-ended right now, I think —there are so many different camps operating at once. I think at this point, everyone's trying to hang on. This is a period where artists, a lot of them drop out, and so there's a big focus, I think, on making sure that you're not one of them and kind of securing yourself in your own belief system and your own work ethic and your gallery and everything so that you can kind of ride out the storm. It's a pretty bad economy right now, so that's always tricky for art. And, unfortunately, the days of renting a loft space in Venice for 70 bucks a month are over, so everyone's got high overhead and there's a lot of focus with my generation on the practicalities of how am I going to be an artist much less what am I going to make? And so because of that, people are making whatever is turning them on. So if it's conceptual, if it's figurative, if it's installation art, if it's performance art they're doing that I don't see the huge trends right now. We're in this post-modernist period and it's hard for anyone I think to sit down and really delineate what it is that's going on. I'm getting more and more of a handle as I go along, as my group matures. And as I said to you now, the Michael Duncan show that just opened in San Jose, *L.A. Post-Cool*, that's kind of an interesting indication of what one well-established critic is thinking about, the show that he curated which is really about work that kind of goes against what we've seen for the last 10 years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: More engagement, more honest, personal. Well that doesn't sound like a bad thing.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: More humanistic. It's a great thing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And that's what you want to be part of, right?

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Well I don't want to be part of—I think I *am* a part of it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you're happy with that.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: I'm very happy with that. I think it's hopeful. Don't you?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes, I think it's hopeful.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: You're hopeful about the art world?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes, yes. But it's very complicated, but it's important that you be hopeful and that you feel your work is representing that kind of hope, that it is taking a positive direction, not in a cynical one as your generation. I realize this is so unfair to create these categories and these ways to dismiss or capture like a whole generation. Cynicism has been one of the terms, not just in the art world --

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Yes, it's been very cynical.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And what you described is really quite counter to that. And so it's not typical, and that's hopeful.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: But after 30 years, are *you* still excited looking at art?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sometimes yes, sometimes no, and probably not quite as much by contemporary art. I guess when I know the artist, I personalize too much. But at this stage, I think I told you this, the art that tends to move me is by old masters, like Piero della Francesca—then I can be overwhelmed. I have this emotional response. That doesn't mean that I can't be intrigued with what's going on now.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: What California painter has most moved you?

PAUL KARLSTROM: That changes; for a time it was Diebenkorn. But finally at the end, it [the art] seems almost too detached to relate to emotionally. I never thought of that before. It's very beautiful in-depth removed. Among the ones that interest me the most are some strange ones like Llyn Foulkes. And I think it's because he is so raw and obviously right in there with his beliefs and his anger.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: And he's haunted by it, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I also like Michael McMillen a lot before I even knew who he was he had his effect. I like assemblage. I think that, in fact, that is an authentic, special expression of this place.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Absolutely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's good art, but I could like the painters as well. I think some early Nathan Oliveira's realist paintings are quite beautiful. So again, I guess - I'm not just completely stuck in the '60s, but I tend to keep looking back in that direction. Okay Kristin, thank you.

KRISTIN LEACHMAN: Thank you, Paul.

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