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Oral history interview with Karen Carson,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Karen Carson on December 4, 2003. The interview was conducted at Karen Carson's studio in Venice, California by Anne Ayres for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Funding provided by the Pasadena Art Alliance Grant 2003.

Interview

ANNE AYRES: This is an Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution interview with Karen Carson on December 4, 2003 at Karen Carson's studio in Venice, California. The interviewer is Anne Ayres. This is session one, tape one, side A.

Before we start with some biographical information, I want to comment that here we sit at the center of a conflagration, surrounded by many, many recent paintings and paper that depict wildfires and windstorms. What is the genesis of these works and how will they translate into larger works?

KAREN CARSON: These fire paintings are just studies at the moment. They will be large and, hopefully, terrifying. They're the result of growing up in Oregon, living summers in Montana, and being in Southern California. I find that nature is not a pleasant little romp in the woods and it's not filled with Bambis and beautiful flowers. There's no Disney out there, and you find that one of the things that you worry about the most is fire. The fire [last summer] was burning 10 miles away from us [in Montana] for four weeks. But I had started the paintings before the fires. Then I came back to L.A. to work on them here, and the huge fires started [in our mountains]. So it's something that really concerns all of us, especially with the global climate changing, fires will be a seasonal part of our lives. They [these paintings] had to do with trying to find an image in nature that used visual vocabularies that come from Turner and Abstract Expressionism. I tried to drain some of the sentimentality from nature and bring in the emotion of the stroke. They are painted on silk to further the looseness. So they're essentially, I guess, dramatic, romantic depictions of something that terrifies me. And in some ways, the gesture of paint is so intimate and so physical that I think I can really transfer fear. I guess that's kind of a classic Abstract Expressionist tactic. I am revisiting expressionist paintings. I grew up with it even if it took a long time for the news to arrive in Oregon. That's what I learned in college. It's what made us feel Bohemian, slashing away at the canvas with paint. It was the real deal! So this is a much less self-indulgent way of dealing with Abstract Expressionism because it's related to an external vision as opposed to an internal one. The fire you see. You see the smoke. You see the thing move and flicker and dance. And it's really ideally suited to paint. In Montana the wind blows the entire atmosphere. The grass and the landscape is constantly animated and constantly busy. So I'm using ideas, I think, that come a little bit from futurism and from all the painters, bless their hearts, who over the years tried to show motion in their work with film and video to compete with paintings seems to be such an ancient and peculiar medium with which to animate an inert surface – an inert surface – trying to imply motion. But I think in the face of big budget, wild technology in films today, I'm really interested in these sorts of antiquated, marginal attempts to breathe some kind of animation into still objects. In the wind paintings I can use some more strictly graphic symbols such as arrows and other directional marks.

MS. AYRES: They will become banners? Will they also become light boxes?

MS. CARSON: Yes. They will be painted on – well, they might be some light boxes, but mostly they're going to be on stretched silk, so that they hang like air. And I worked for a long time trying to figure out what surface I could use. I had been using the vinyl for my other landscapes, but the silk seems to – if you look at Japanese paintings, they did nature paintings better than anybody ever did – provide the air and the light.

It's difficult to work on because you can't go back and you can't change. It's a very immediate and sort of terrifying surface because you have to predict the spread of the paint; you have to put a line down with just the right touch, otherwise it's too thick; and you can't lighten the dark. So it's basically like watercolor. It's a very unforgiving medium. But it also just gives itself over to a landscape in a very wonderful way.

Without being on the stretchers and having printed frames around them that are sort of baroque or decorative – they become similar to these funny fabric tapestries you see in junk stores that people used for cheap art in the '20s and '30s. They always look a little dusty and filthy. You just pin them up on the walls, and they're the ultimate portable art experience. You think of a Bierstadt painting and think of how he captured the actual grandeur with big set pieces. The portability issue is something that I'm trying to address with these things. If you live in the landscape and you're able to paint it, roll it up and put it in a little package and carry it home, it's the ultimate way of living *my* two lives. Living in the city and living in the country. So I can bring the mountains and the wind back with me without much hassle.

MS. AYRES: Let's go on with a general discussion of your upbringing. Where did you grow up? Did your parents

encourage your interest in art? What made you decide on a career as an artist? I guess we're talking about schooling and early influences, artistic and otherwise.

MS. CARSON: I grew up in Corvallis, Oregon, which was at that time a very small college town and that is much larger now. My father was a botanist who eventually became a dean, and lived the rest of his life as an administrator in a college. My mother was a typical housewife of that era, except that she had been an artist and was quite talented. Unfortunately, she was one of these people that never believed she was so she easily gave it up to have four children. She encouraged all four of us to be creative. There were a lot of crayons, art supplies, paper, and things around the house, and she was always making really interesting things. She had taught in grade school in the state of Washington. She was a very good teacher.

I was incredibly shy, and during the first three years of school I was renowned for never having said one word in class -- even when called upon. Drawing was the way that I had to communicate. I started drawing when I was very, very young. I wasn't silent at home; I wasn't some kind of strange little, totally thwarted child, I was just terribly, socially shy.

In the third grade, my teacher that I had recognized that I had some talent and she started really encouraging it. It was the moment when I found out that I could get something for being an artist. It was all right being able to draw. It was better than not being able to speak. She encouraged that, and I think from that time - from the third grade on - I saw myself as an artist.

I went to the University of Oregon for my undergraduate degree and then went to UCLA for a graduate degree. I also went to Scripps in Claremont for one year after undergraduate school, but then went on to UCLA to get my MFA in 1972.

I always wanted to make art. If you grow up in Oregon, you had no notion of a career as an artist because there weren't any museums and you didn't see any art. I didn't know what art was, aside from a few picture books [and what my mother did]. I didn't know that artists could have shows and become famous. To me, being an artist was that you just did it every day, and that was just how you understood with the world. When I got to L.A., it didn't take me very long to get totally convinced that I wanted a career as an artist and wanted to be important, glamorous and recognized - which perhaps any 24-year-old would want. To start combining all of those years of loving making art and doing it every day, with a strategy and the understanding that you need to socially move within a culture to have a career, was extremely exciting. It had nothing to do with an Oregonian background. It had to do with completely outfitting myself with knowledge that I never had before. It was very exciting to be in graduate school here.

MS. AYRES: You must have felt, too, that you had to respond to the contemporary art that you were being taught. And the work you did after receiving your MFA, seems to be very smart and personal in the response to minimalism and process art. I'm speaking about the zipper pieces. Would you describe their origin? You were not a painter to begin with. I mean, coming out of graduate school you. . .

MS. CARSON: Yes. No, I was a painter when I went into graduate school. And my first quarter there I painted, but it was not something that I wanted to continue because I didn't feel part of what was going on in the art world outside of school. There were nothing but painters at UCLA when I went there. Diebenkorn was there and [William] Brice and [Jan] Stussy and I was like a lot of willful young artists; that as much as I liked my teachers and admired them for what they were, I didn't want anything to do with what they did. I was looking outward and seeing all this minimalist art being made in New York and L.A., and was really interested and finding a way to respond to it.

I started the zipper pieces in graduate school. They were my MFA show. The idea of zippers occurred to me while watching minimalism take form as a very masculine structure and made from things that were extremely masculine - steel, and wood, and hard, impenetrable materials, that I really wanted to be able to bring the feminine viewpoint to minimalism. I didn't want to make feminist art that had to do with imagery, symbols, goddesses, and the kitchen. And I really felt that my place as a feminist was to be in the masculine world. I wanted to use irony, satire, or at least some kind of humor.

The zipper pieces were easy for me to deal with because I had sewn for years. I was a 4H sewing champion. I made a grand champion party dress once and sewing came naturally to me. Also the canvas was wonderfully supple and easy to work with. These changing structures I made didn't completely leave painting in the sense that they drooped and changed and dripped when you moved the zippers, and that fell in ways that you could imagine a big stroke of paint might do. Not only were they formalized geometric structures that were very obvious objects, but they also had some kind of relationship to gestural painting for me.

MS. AYRES: They also could be reconfigured in different ways!

MS. CARSON: Yes. You could change them as quickly as you could change a painting. One of the things about all of that hardcore minimalist art is that it didn't seem to have the kind of fluidity that I enjoy in art. It didn't have

the kind of ambiguity that I like, either. I think making those things that could be changed also became a real feminist gesture because the one thing I love about women and especially women who are friends of mine now, is that we seem so much more fluid and easy with change compared to men. Change to me is a more privileged domain for women than it is for men.

MS. AYRES: Even Robert Morris's felt pieces that depend on gravity seem more static.

MS. CARSON: They appear more static, yes. I think the men of my generation really can't afford to appear loose and adaptable. Their whole *modus operandi* as an American man is to get a job, hold the job, be who that person is, and rule the roost. At the time, I saw it as a sort of damn intrusion that women couldn't be as tough and sort of unadaptable as men seem to be, but I see it as a privilege now.

Anyway, the feminism was a subtext to that work, but the work itself has more to do with what I was, a formalist artist who was very interested in composition, and in the nature of shape and line. I saw art for the way it looks, and I look at it first for that and all the meanings and the subtexts were things that were there because I tried to be smart about making a piece of art. The interest in form was the most important thing.

MS. AYRES: Would you talk a little bit about the large, torn paper collages called the wood grains? They started in graduate school, too?

MS. CARSON: No. They were about two years out of graduate school. I made a lot of the zipper pieces, and then I ran into so much trouble because I wasn't showing them, and I had yards and yards of this stuff. When they were shown, they needed to be zipped and unzipped [and changed by viewer participation] and needed to have museum privileges, and that just couldn't happen. I didn't quit them because I wasn't getting the right attention, I just had too many of them.

MS. AYRES: Before you talk about the wood grains, I am reminded that there was a large paper zipper installation at the Brand Library, so you were thinking in terms of the ephemeral.

MS. CARSON: Yes. That was the end of that series of work. I made a big brown paper installation with white plastic cloth zippers. The paper all had big, torn holes as well as the zipper holes. It was the end of that body of work. Then I started these torn paper collages. The collages had to do with being interested in not making work on canvas. It occurs to me that I have tried in almost every body of work I have done to avoid working on canvas, and when I did work on it I did some of my poorest work because I guess I just don't like it. It's not smooth enough. It's not supple enough.

The torn paper collages were done at a time when a lot of artists were working off the stretcher bar and there were a lot of paper things on the wall. Carole Caroompas was doing her drip things on paper, and I remember Peter Plagens was doing these wonderful paintings on roadmaps that were all taped together. It was a time when everybody was sort of experimenting with that. It was easy to work in a very large scale because it was an easy issue for storage and portability. I printed the paper from rolled-up ink roll on four-by-eight sheets of plywood and then tore it up and put them together in collages. I think they probably were a sort of belated expression of all of the cubism I had been introduced to in school in Oregon.

Wood grain is an image that I love. It's like air. It's like flame. It's the texture of nature. I grew up in a logging town. Wood for me has always been a really important surface. It's hard to remember those things. They were so time-consuming. All the glue. The glue sort of didn't come out very well. They were suspect, archival. After doing a lot of brown ones, I started rolling up the papers in tangerines and turquoises and made a wood grain that looked more like that kind of weird Formica that you would find on a table, which would be fake wood grain. They became more of what I was interested in. I don't know, I just kind of let them drift away - [like a lot of the various art I have made].

MS. AYRES: In some small way this is jumping ahead, but it turns up again when you use linoleum asphalt tile on some of your constructions.

MS. CARSON: Yes. Right. That's interesting. I like those found textures. I think if you grow up in a deprived community like I grew up in terms of visual stimulus and you don't have lots of artificiality, Oregon was all real wood and things were all straight ahead, not a lot of optical hijinks going on. [You might find fake things exotic.] I got to a city and I started seeing all of those substitute surfaces for things that people love to use. Those things made a big impact on my day-to-day life in terms of being an artist.

MS. AYRES: Even in those wood grain collages, you began to leave the tape as a formal element. Again, a question of movement or flickering or notes across a surface.

MS. CARSON: Yes. Just a way to still be a painter and not really be one. That's another thing I think I have always done -- is try to keep the painting alive, but not really use paint.

MS. AYRES: Which is rather expressive of that period in the '90s, when everyone seemed to be making paintings out of everything but paint. At the same time, I think you're really appreciated for your draftsmanship. You have always drawn. I wanted you to speak a little bit about the bed series, with titles like *Flaming Bed* and *Shattered Bed*. These things seem to me as if you're drawing perhaps on some personal experience?

MS. CARSON: Well, I'm a horrible insomniac. That's the start of it. I have never really been able to sleep. But I was doing those at the same time I was doing the zipper pieces. Because I love to draw, I almost have always been carrying on a body of drawings that is a parallel universe to the larger pieces, the ones that are much more experimental. Drawing is a way to express things like humor, thinking, and personal things.

I have never really done things that are highly personal. I mean, they are personal, but they're not. In a way, I would never be able to rip my heart out and put it into a drawing on the wall. They are always sort of bathed in some ironical or humorous content because I just save all of the *Stürm und Drang* and angst for my private hours and never really put it into the work.

The bed drawings are drawings of a young woman who was living a life in which, as a feminist and an artist in the '70s and '80s, we were not supposed to be sexy. We were supposed to be powerful. But there is no way that a woman in her early 20s doesn't want to be sexy. The bed and your sexual life at that age becomes a very significant - and also sort of obscured -- part of your identity. Can I really be having this much fun, or should I really just cool it and put on my army fatigues, my jackboots and cut off my hair and get somewhere? The bed drawings really were just a kind of soap opera gesture of how much you try to work out in the gamesmanship of your sexuality. They also had to do with the kind of kitsch that soap opera is; it's just all this kind of stuff about relationships that you go through when you're young. So the beds ended up being surreal inventions that came out of different moods and gestures that a couple might have if they were getting along or not getting along.

MS. AYRES: A critic wrote a piece for *Art News* in 1974 titled "A Woman's Place Is in the Galleries." You've touched on this, but it needs saying in terms of the situation for women in the art world. Lest we forget, would you describe what it was like for a woman to be an ambitious, serious, professional artist in the early '70s? I think you've answered this, but you might want to add a few comments.

MS. CARSON: Well, I think for somebody who was as naïve as I was -- coming from a background in which my parents were totally accepting of my brothers and myself and my sister, and where there were no gender privileges in my household -- is that I was still in a slight state of shock when I realized that it was so easy not to be taken seriously. I think because I was right there when people started to get really visible about their disappointments and their angers that it was quite heady and it was really exciting. I think it was so exciting and so heady that sometimes we didn't even look at how little we were actually getting.

I think we thought we were getting a lot of things that we didn't get because we were so vocal and we were so out there and we were so supportive of one another. And I think the best part of feminism was -- the best part of any art movement -- is that you find a very wonderful social life. You find friends, support, and interests that you wouldn't otherwise need. I think that every art movement gets people together around significant ideas and interests, and that's what feminism did.

It was hard to be a woman artist in those days, because if you did get any visibility you got it only because you were a woman artist, and a lot of us wanted just to be known as artists. Actually, when I was a young artist, I admired Jackson Pollack, and I think in my subconscious I thought I could be someone like that. And I didn't even stop to think that Jackson Pollock was a man. Oh, there's something there.

I didn't have that conflict until I got down here, and I think the feminists were divided into very strong camps. You were dealing with the male part of the problem in the conflict; so you're also dealing with feminists that didn't like you because you wore sexy clothes or paid attention to your looks and stuff. It was a very social time, and that was important. Having been a teacher for years, I think it's very important for young artists to be aligned behind something other than their own private quest for a career. So in one sense it was a gift to women that they hadn't received what men had received because we really learned to deal with the world in much more complicated ways.

MS. AYRES: Which probably affected your drawing interests. I want to talk about the "How the Draw" series, as parodies of how-to-draw. For instance, the steps in which an egg beater becomes a cactus or a bear becomes a cement mixer. But besides being very funny, they seem to jump the tracks of rationality. Did you mean to suggest the breakdown of orderly categories of the language, language making life both possible and constraining it?

MS. CARSON: They obviously had to do with language, but they had to do with the visual language of someone who sees words or ideas. I love to draw and when I was young the first thing I found out was that it's a transforming experience that you can take something and put it on paper and turn it into something that it really isn't. In that sense, drawing to me has always been pure magic. I mean, the first time I put two parallel lines together that converged and I had created a railroad track, and I looked at it and thought, "Oh, I could run

right into that space." It was just amazing -- very irrational. I think that if you could interview little children who've learned "How-to-Draw" something, they would be so excited about this idea of illusion. But these *How to Draw* drawings had a lot to do with the idea that if you followed all the right rules you would achieve a certain image or a certain place in life. And I think, as a woman artist, I've found that if you followed all the rules, you didn't know what you were getting anyway. Surprise is a simple kind of magic.

[END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE A]

[SESSION 1, TAPE ONE, SIDE B]

MS. CARSON: I think if we dissect everything I've done up to today and filter it back down to the inception or the beginning, that my ideas are always pretty darn simple. One of the things that we saw growing up in Oregon were all those Walter Foster *How to Draw* books, so he was the only kind of connection I had to art in growing up. And I think those drawings just purely came out of the idea that those books always just taught you how to draw by doing the right lines and you ended up with the right image. And I just decided that it didn't have to be that way.

That's the easiest thing, and when I did the *How to Draw* drawings that had hands that were drawing the drawings, they were puns on words, like how to draw a bridge and how to draw a cart. And they came from a much stronger interest in puns and language, and the language of the hand, and the hand showing the hand doing the drawing. It was real -- how should I say it -- kind of not a distancing view but a real articulate view of what drawing really is about. And that language can be intrinsic to a visual picture without having any words in it, which I thought was interesting. I don't know -- because there was so much text work at that time, too, I was just trying to find a way of doing work about text with no text, and so, but they were so sort of silly. I've never taken any of that seriously, except that they were so much fun to do. I really loved doing them.

MS. AYRES: Well, you certainly take your painting seriously, and you began to paint around 1978 the large, abstract tondos, which are gestural and brushy. They reveal your abstract expressionist interest in the paint handling and the push-pull of shallow space and all that sort of thing. Were you interested in reinvigorating abstract painting as a response to conceptual art, or was it something that you just naturally fell into?

MS. CARSON: Well, I've done precious little and maybe not enough responding to what's actually happening out there. I mean, I always know it, and I've always been extremely involved with what's going on, but I don't know. I think after doing those paper pieces and all that gluing and cutting, I just wanted some physical relationship with art again, and I, at the time, was looking at a lot of southwestern pottery and a lot of round imagery, and I think they came out of that more than anything. And the tondo was a much harder shape to work with than a rectangle, so I tried to make that work.

I'll just be frank and go on historical record and say that was the lowest point for my painting, because it wasn't something that I was really interested enough in to push. And there were things in my personal life at that time that were so much more compelling and diverting that, in a way, I think those paintings were some kind of weird vacation or apology or something. I don't know. I just don't feel very good about those paintings. They got better when I took the circle and started putting double circles together and began to make paintings in which those circles begin to compete with one another and started making a spatial gesture that was much more powerful. And that -- that happened by going to New York and spending some time -- should I not get into this yet? They went from the tondo to much more complex paintings. And I think they got better when I really began to see them as just part of a larger context of space.

MS. AYRES: But it also fits in with your interest in motion, your feeling about wheels that are turning, and wheels within wheels that are turning. I may be wrong here, but I think it was Picasso who commented that the tondo or, in his case, the oval solved the problem of what to do with the corners of a rectangle.

MS. CARSON: Yes.

MS. AYRES: But then we're talking about a more centered imagery, where your painting is more of a constructed --

MS. CARSON: Yes, I tried to spin it off. I tried to use the straight lines within that circular shape, because one of the things that you -- when you start working on that, it keeps leading you to the center, no matter what you do, and that sort of becomes a bit of an annoyance. And you start thinking of trying to make a painting where the paint would defy centrifugal force or would actually operate within it and go off the edges and spew off the sides. I think if I'd ever gotten really into those, I would have explored that idea more of trying to break the restriction of being sent back to the center all the time. And who knows? If I live long enough, I might try it again. I don't know.

MS. AYRES: Well, at the time, what did you think of Judy Chicago's emphasis on the circle form, as a sexual

image -- a reference to inner space and the power of female sexuality.

MS. CARSON: Well, it worked for her. I think it was a good image to choose for that kind of dissertation. But I also feel that the tondo or the circle is one of the great forceful symbols of life for everyone, of Earth, of everything. It's just I think that all of that stuff got pulled into the feminist domain because it made a lot of sense, but it isn't only a feminist domain. It's really a human one, and the longer you live, you realize that almost everything refers to male and female and the whole cosmic force.

But she used those images in ways that were very effective, and they had some meaning to people. I never have bought into any kind of dogma, so for me, the tondo or the circle is just a highly energized, highly interesting formal surface to work on. And I didn't have any notion of feminism or femaleness with those things.

MS. AYRES: Yes, there's always that issue of discussing the circle as an empty space or as a hole or something that's in a sense non-existent, which is really not the female experience at all.

MS. CARSON: No, it's not. I've never walked around relating to my hole as it were. Maybe my W-H-O-L-E, but never my H-O-L-E.

MS. AYRES: Well, as I remember it - correct me here if I'm wrong - I don't think you were included in either the West Coast Bad Girls exhibition or in Amelia Jones' Sexual Politics exhibition. But I always thought that you would have been perfect for Paul Schimmel's Helter Skelter exhibition. We're jumping ahead to the large shape canvases, when I mention that. But to me it's a sign of your originality, that you never fit well into large, curatorial designs.

MS. CARSON: I've just gotten sort of famous for being left out. I get calls after some exhibition where someone will be calling to ask, "Why weren't you in that show?" It's sort of heart-breaking really, when I look back over my history. I thought those zipper pieces should have been included in any feminist show. I mean, they really were feminist. I just have never really been very good at being out at the right place at the right time. I think that has a lot to do with it, too. And I'm such an individualist that I just don't do the work it takes to be included.

MS. AYRES: You lived in New York from about 1980 to 1985. Why did you move to New York? Who were your artist friends there, and do you think New York affected your painting?

MS. CARSON: I think in New York the greatest part of my experience there was just educating myself about what I'd never been able to see before. I went to the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art] every week, to the Whitney [Museum of American Art] every week. I went to the museums constantly, and so it was a very important time for educating myself and seeing art. I really didn't have that much of an education. And so I did that. I loved living in a city. I had never lived in a real city. I don't consider Los Angeles a real urban environment. And it was heavenly. It was just like everything that, as a kid, from reading novels I had believed was there. It was the speed, the art and the kitsch and the diversity and the congestion, and it was just wonderful.

I had friends there. In New York, you make friends because you walk - you're walking down the street, and you run into them. You go have a drink, and you get to know people on an inadvertent basis. You just have all these chance meetings, so you begin to make a lot of friends. I don't know that they're ever as deep as the friendships you make in Los Angeles, where you have to make such an effort to see one another that the rewards have to be large enough to try.

I think New York was a great social experience. Jack Barth was living across the street, and James Hill and Diana were living across the street. And oh gosh, - there were - I can't even remember. This is a bad time to be interviewed, when you can't remember names anymore. But I knew David Novros, and he was down the street, and Elizabeth Murray, and just a lot of different people. Gary Stephan - these were that I wasn't really good friends with, but I hung out enough with them to really see how artists in New York behaved. Occasionally I'd go over to Peter Schjeldahl's and have dinner when he'd have some of the heavy hitters there.

One thing I found out in New York very fast is that there's no casual conversation. Artists get together and they're still working. They're much more aggressive in getting their position than we are here. I think L.A.'s very different now. Maybe it's much more ambitious than it used to be, but my generation had a lot of fun. We were less inclined to sort of brutalize somebody because they didn't know a certain painting of Tintoretto's than in New York.

I remember one night - I don't remember who it was at the dinner party, but I didn't know these particular paintings, and I might as well have said, "I murder young children on the corner." It was, "What, you don't know those paintings?" And I thought, this is a place where your brain and your education and your sophistication really count. And that was good for me because I had to start using part of me that I hadn't really exercised yet. It also got a little too intense. I'm too West Coast to live that kind of life. I need more humor and more eccentricity and less rules, so it was a little confining.

MS. AYRES: That was a reason to return to Los Angeles? Because you spent actually a lot of time in L.A.

MS. CARSON: Yes, I was kind of going back and forth. But I left because I no longer had a place to live there and, quite frankly, I was over 40, and I was not prepared to work at jobs that took all of my time. I couldn't afford it, but I actually had a job from which I was making quite a bit of money teaching a very wealthy woman to draw. She'd come five days a week, if I'd let her, and she was actually keeping me afloat. I was actually teaching her how to draw. I thought, this isn't a long-standing job, and there are no benefits. I had been offered a teaching job at Santa Barbara, so I came back as a result of that.

MS. AYRES: Well, would you talk a little bit about your experience with Stephanie Barron's 1981 exhibition, Art in Los Angeles the Museum as Site: 16 Projects. Was this the first time you used a banner? I remember myself very well that the banner was on one side of the museum.

MS. CARSON: Yes, but that was the first banner I did.

MS. AYRES: It took until at least the early 1990s before you had returned to a banner, didn't it?

MS. CARSON: Yes. I'm trying to think of when I started doing banners at the end of '94.

MS. AYRES: Around the residency in Las Vegas. But we're jumping. We're jumping a bit. You must have been pleased to be in that Stephanie's exhibition.

MS. CARSON: Yes, it was nice to be able to create a painting that was in a site exhibition, because paintings are notoriously not seen as a site kind of technology. Driving down the street and seeing this huge painting hanging from an art museum was very exciting. Yes, it was really fun.

MS. AYRES: You abandoned the tondo form and returned to a rectangle form while in New York and also just upon your return to L.A. But they all seem to have a kind of dark tonality, and you were using a little bit of spray paint as in graffiti, and then you followed with linoleum tiles in the pieces back here. Do you relate that to any New York experience, especially with the dark tonality and the graffiti?

MS. CARSON: Yes. It's a cliché to say that we live in the city of light, but we do. When you get back to New York, you realize that there's such an absence of color there. I've always made work out of where I am to some degree, and I don't think you can make paintings in New York that you can make in L.A. At least I couldn't because I didn't find color. I had found that the tondo was a perfect shape for the energy that you find in L.A., because it's like living on a dish here. I drive on the freeways and I watch the landscape, like move in these great plate-like, circular motions.

In New York, it's all grid, and it's all compacted, so the circles became much more the kind of energy that you might find in a window or on a graffitied train car or something like that. I think then the circles became forms that sort of floated in these kinds of compacted, room-like spaces that had to do with the New York experience of reflections and windows.

MS. AYRES: Air shafts.

MS. CARSON: Yes, air shafts, and subway stations with those vertical columns, and the train going through very quickly. I think it takes a long time to actually find some of the deep psychological inventions in abstract painting, I think I had to live and look back a while before I understood them. They had a lot to do with a very unresolved and a very power-inclined personal relationship with somebody at the time.

So these ideas, these kinds of optically competing spaces in which there was a high regard for the ambiguousness of the in-and-outness in these compositions had to do with a very serious power struggle in a personal relationship. So it has really been interesting to find out that even when I thought I was just in there running amok with space and form and color and shape that I was actually working out some deep psychological and personal conflict.

MS. AYRES: Do you believe that formal arrangements can speak significantly and express the deep emotion that's actually communicated in work to other people?

MS. CARSON: I don't think I can, as an artist . . . ever hope for that. I mean, maybe if I were really, really profoundly capable of directing the traffic, I could get someone to understand what I'm feeling. I have experiences with abstract painting that are very deep psychological responses, but I have no idea whether they have anything to do with what the artist was intending. That's why I like abstract painting.

I think that a lot of people won't assign any of those intentions to an abstract painting, but if you've seen enough - if you've thrown enough paint around yourself, you understand that there's so much of yourself in these things that the paintings can't help but have some kind of emotional subtext. Today, there's a lot of abstract art that is

about strategy and product. This generation needed to take all that emotion out of abstraction because they are really tired of what we put in it. To make or see a perfectly beautiful, mindless piece of abstract painting is a very refreshing experience today.

Because I am from my generation, I usually try to go beyond formalisms. I assign a job to myself, to feel something in my art that I can own. I just don't know how often it resonates with what I had in my soul, but sometimes maybe I get close.

MS. AYRES: What made you begin to extend into the viewer's space with actual wooden molding as a formal element? I seem to remember that you actually had broken or hurt one of your hands.

MS. CARSON: Oh, I was just a wreck! God. Well, really the struggle was, not wanting to work on canvas. I was buying panels that were paper, so I could work on paper that looked kind of like canvas. I got back to L.A., and the superstructure of the architecture in New York disappeared, and I was back out in this open territory. I guess in some ways, I just didn't want to give up the tension of actual architecture, so I started building panels that had different wood moldings applied to them, because I could actually build a space. I could build what I imagined was an architectural world, but it was a bas-relief of painting I was making. I was back to painting, but I wasn't painting on canvas. I had a ready-made surface for creating ambiguous space. Here was the structure that had a certain kind of perspectival integrity to it, with frames creating frames within frames, which created a penetrated illusionistic space. I was able to paint on top of that and create another spatial form, add the linoleum tiles, and create a real surface.

So I think what I liked best about working the way I did on those is that I created an architecturally ambiguous space. You could move in and out of those things in ways that were very interesting, and they were formal puzzles. They also had enough spray paint on the hard structures, and were very well built and very substantial but look transparent in places. I could do what graffiti does to architecture. I could dissolve the architecture so I dissolved the hard form. If you see a heavily graffitied building, it seems to have dismantled the architecture.

I saw the painting seem to fall apart and reconfigure. They were very interesting. I think they were the most interesting paintings I ever did. I never found working that way boring for a minute.

MS. AYRES: Well, about this spray paint, it also labels layers of the surface as a painting, so you have the illusion of deep space -- painted, pictorial space -- and then your declaration of the painting as a plain surface.

MS. CARSON: Yes, and the spray is especially good on wood because it's air, but it could only be there because of the physicality. I had this overlay like smoke. So, it became smoke and mirrors, because when I added the mirrors, I added another spatial dimension. They also became perversely figurative, because I would look at the paintings, and I would see a slice of my own body in them. I called them *Abstract Narcissism*.

MS. AYRES: *Abstract Narcissism*.

MS. CARSON: Because of the mirrors.

MS. AYRES: It's hard also to get away from the slight suggestion of personal involvement with spray paint, with its coding as rebellion or as making your mark on the world. And I'm thinking of the wood -- the particular "Wood Grain" where there seems to be reflection of your body within the collage and your hand, and then the drawings-of-the-hand-drawings. It's a way of sneaking you in without ...

MS. CARSON: I'm a very discreet person and a very polite person, and I think to some degree that's been something that has not been to my best advantage. When I worked with spray, I never could jump into anything about being bad. I may have related it to graffiti, but I never related it to rebellion and aggression. If I'd taken those cans and sprayed the hell out of these things, I could have made them more powerful -- but less me.

I've always been concerned about not lifting too much from a certain thing that's going on. I used to tell my students to do what I should have done. That's one of the good things about teaching. You have a chance to make somebody else do what you wish you'd done. I just told them to never worry about being polite or nice and just take it all out, show it and push it. Turn the temperature up and be aggressive.

I think one of the things I always contented myself with, in terms of those paintings and all of my work, was that I changed [my work] as often as I wished. I have always been been a creature of impulse and I love trying to do something new. That was the bad part of me, because artists of my generation were not supposed to do that. You were supposed to do the developed series. You'd modify and modify until you'd reach your level of perfection. It was a long course of development, but to me that was just too agonizingly boring. I think that if I were to imagine myself being a bad girl on any level, it would have been that I just never did the same thing twice.

MS. AYRES: Well, the shards of mirror also introduced movement, because as you walk in front of the painting or draw back, the fictional world is changing all the time. I was going to say real world, but I think I do mean fictional world – the world of painting.

MS. CARSON: Yes. One of the things that I really loved about being in a room with those paintings, when I was working on them, is that I'd go back to get a brush full of paint, and I'd feel a twinkling in the studio. The body was moving across the mirrors. It was really a way to glamorize the studio experience and the fantasy. I used to have this fantasy, which I've long since given up, is that one day I'd see reflected in one of those mirrors a Picasso or a [Bartolommeo] Montagna. My paintings would be hanging in the company of great artists.

The movement in the mirror is still really important to me. I don't know – I guess we're sort of getting at things in this conversation that maybe I'll have to think about when we're done. It's this interest in change, movement, the self and not the self; the interest I have in being in my work, but also allowing other people to be in it. Leaving it open enough that no one has to really see what I'm seeing. They can make up what they need to make up about it. I don't want to give something that doesn't generously involve the viewer.

I think the mirrors were generous. I have a niece who knows nothing about art, nor does she care, came to my studio years ago. She ran over to the art, and I thought, "Oh, she's growing up. Maybe she's interested." She just went over to put on some lipstick. She used the mirror. So there you go. That works, I guess.

MS. AYRES: Yes, I was going to get a bit pretentious, I guess, and say that you moved from constructing a shifting plane to constructing fragments. I guess I'm pushing again for a kind of way of expressing a personal inner reality, while emphasizing the outer.

MS. CARSON: I don't think that's pretentious. I know that if we talked about this long enough we would talk about the shattered image. There's nothing about myself, or the people I know that seems to be anything other than multifaceted. Sometimes it's just so fractured that it's scary. I mean, how often do we stand centered and perfectly still in our lives.

We live in an optical retinal world that is fractured, mobile, and unstill. That was just a way to explode myself into what might be a cosmic symbol, but also treat it the same way that those pots one buys in Tijuana with mirror fragments on them. The Mandala shapes of the fragmented glass were both decorative and kitschy. They were about Mandalas and about putting myself in a painting only to be exploded and sent back into the room again. I think, if I had seen those through to some illogical conclusion, they would have just been almost impossible to look at because they would be so totally fragmented. I would rather have them be a little more ambiguous formally.

They also had to do with changing my own life. I was heading into my 40s, and my body was changing, and my personal life was changing. [I wanted to move inside myself and release the body.]

[END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE B]

[SESSION 1, TAPE TWO, SIDE A]

MS. AYRES: In work such as *God's Eye*, were you interested in creating a visual language of metaphysical revelation? I'm using the word "metaphysical" in lieu of "spiritual," but we know what I mean.

MS. CARSON: The God's eye is, of course, used in many cultures in different formats. There are rays of light that emanate from a big circular sprayed place, and there is an Indian-inspired panel on the right hand side, most of it inferring ethnic cultures.

I think that *God's Eye* was a conscious inclusion of religious-looking kitsch things; I don't know. I'm very interested in spiritual art, not so much Christian, but Buddhist and Hindu. The images that come from religions aren't so grim and so unpleasant as Christian iconography.

MS. AYRES: Early modernism has examples of this in the work of, say [Kasimir] Malevich or [Wassily] Kandinsky, especially Malevich in his use of the square.

MS. CARSON: Yes. In this country, especially in the West, artists used Northwest Coast Indian design devices and imagery; there's a lot of art made in the West that has to do with images from cultures that have different belief systems. One aspect of maturing as an artist means that one can give up the idea of creating original imagery -- the totally unfamiliar image. Somehow I can modify and reconstitute and mix up this library of influences I've had over the years. My paintings, after I left New York, became much more involved with art from all cultures and from all places. Every idea that was visually strong could be changed and used as my own. A lot of these have images in them that come from a lot of other cultures. [You do not have to be a part of a system to use and admire its images.]

MS. AYRES: Your comment is almost specific to the West Coast. I'm thinking of Gordon Onslow Ford –

MS. CARSON: Yes, the Dynaton artists.

MS. AYRES: Maybe you could comment a little bit about regionalism or being out of the mainstream that might encourage –

MS. CARSON: Well, it's sad to say, I have been an L.A. artist who knows nothing about this treasure trove of artists that make up West Coast art. It was regrettably much later that I found out about people like Onslow Ford. Of course, Mullican was teaching at UCLA when I was there, but because it was the high minimal days, I missed it. Lee [Mullican] was doing his wonderful, spiritual explosions, and of course people like Lari Pitman picked up on it.

I don't know where this is going. I just think that the West Coast now has artists making wonderful, weird, reconstituted art influenced by Europe and New York. By the time that art was made here, it was very, very special and different. Working out here is such a distinctly different way to live a life. You just don't make the same kind of art on the West Coast. There isn't this intense community of discourse. In New York there really are ways that you should be working if you want to get somewhere. Unfortunately, it's that way in L.A. now, but for my generation the West was a place you could do anything. There was all this open negative space you could fill it up with any idea. It was a much more generous milieu in which to work. We worked out here for a long time with little support either from collectors or from the world at large.

I don't want to get into a discourse about what's wrong with being out here and what's right with being out here. What's right about being here is that I have the privilege of invention. It's still one of the best places to live and make art.

MS. AYRES: In the period we're talking about, the works we're looking at that are constructed with wood molding and these shards of glass and so forth you then begin to tentatively break out of the rectangular format – the work breaks out of a frame.

MS. CARSON: Yes, and there are skewed shapes that are irregular in shape. Well, that was just another one of those days in the studio where I just did it and skipped around and jumped up and down and thought, "Ooh, I found something new to do." It seemed with all these spinning shapes and the mirrors that extended into the viewer's space that it was obvious to move to something that actually penetrated -- all these little sharp points that projected the image into a true explosion.

MS. AYRES: And then there came what I think I once called the scandalous butterfly --- in Butterflies are Free to Burn, when you actually affixed to the upper left hand corner a metal shape?

MS. CARSON: What do they call it? It's like a house butterfly. You buy them in places where they sell whirligigs for lawns. People all over the country, and especially in the rural areas, seem to sort of affix these butterflies to their front porches.

MS. AYRES: But you painted on it, though.

MS. CARSON: I painted on it and put mirrors on it. I'd been working a huge painting with the gold leaf, flames, and mirrors and lots of color. I had this butterfly over in the corner of the studio. I had been getting dressed to go out and put a big pin on my coat. I decided that I could use that butterfly the way you'd use a brooch on an evening gown. It was really about just adding something that just made it even more elegant.

I started thinking about how insects are attracted to light and moth to flames, and so it also became one of those things where I said, "Well, my work is so beautiful and compelling that it attracts large insects." Actually, looking at this painting it's a very good painting. I'm looking at these things in a catalogue right now and I'm realizing they were really good and fun. I had so much fun doing these things. It had to do also with heading into menopause. I'm not the young cutie I was, and I can take everything that I wished for physically in myself and put it in my work. It was the complete, final stage of giving over my physical vanity to the vanity of the art rather than to my own body. It was very liberating.

They were very much about the transformation of feminine vanity into power. The power of being undeniable – making these pictures that were so aggressive that I just could not stand in front of them without being sort of poked and prodded. That was one of the best shows I ever had. It didn't even get a review.

MS. AYRES: Then you actually used the shape of a butterfly for the shape of the painting.

MS. CARSON: Of the panel, yes. Well, it has the clocks on it, too, which had to do with my biological clock definitely being out. Actually, I think I'd had a hysterectomy by then. Yes, I had. Perhaps these things also came out of that, with these big, spiky 1950s clocks which radiate out and tell you that time is a very wonderful, scary thing, and it's over and it's beginning all the time; it never stops.

MS. AYRES: You even included electric lights.

MS. CARSON: Yes, in that big flower piece. Yes, I guess I decided to really put in everything that I liked in those paintings.

MS. AYRES: In some ways those are risky images: the clocks, the butterflies, as if they're clichés of the culture.

MS. CARSON: Yes.

MS. AYRES: They're sort of banal but yet they're incredibly potent.

MS. CARSON: Well, I think they really came out of my great love affair with kitsch. With art that knows no boundaries in terms of bad taste and good taste. I mean, good taste inadvertently, and bad taste probably intentional. I like images that move into cliché. I don't know quite what that's about. I think it has to do with growing up in communities where people didn't know high art. Somehow maybe as an artist I could use their devices to prove to them that high art was okay, and you could use those devices to prove to high-art people that maybe low art was okay. It was a gesture of conciliation between high art and low art.

MS. AYRES: These low-art images catch on because in a sense they concentrate an archetype.

MS. CARSON: Yes.

MS. AYRES: And then they get trashed – overused, but the potency is there.

MS. CARSON: It's always there.

MS. AYRES: The snake, the flower, heart, spider, all of these are images that have a lot of presence.

MS. CARSON: And the angels and the skulls. Well, I also did them at the time that people who were in the know were discovering tattooing. All of a sudden it was hip to have a dragon tattoo on your bicep. I think there was a lot of that kind of hyper imagery in the late '80s. It came out of neo-expressionism. On the West Coast it moved to people like Paul McCarthy and Lari Pitman. Artists out here were not afraid of clichés, decoration. I used butterflies, flames, and snakes. and – I just think that's part of what we see living in this culture. My paintings also came out of Mexican murals. If you look at enough Rivera's and Orozco's, everything squirms in those things. Talk about clichés. I mean, sometimes you just turn from them: "God, I can't take any more of this."

I think my paintings marked a time when I decided to be interested in the most hyper kind of spiritually indulgent imagery. It had to do with becoming really tired of being a nice lady. These were not bad-girl paintings but they were as close as I ever got to paintings that said, "Look at me, look at me, look at me; I want your attention and don't you dare turn away from me."

MS. AYRES: Well, maybe not bad-girl but they certainly could have been Helter-Skelter paintings it seems to me. [1992 MOCA exhibition]

MS. CARSON: Well, they should have been in there, but what can I say?

MS. AYRES: There's a strain also of a kind of fervent morbidity in them that you maybe don't mean as you talk about them. I mean, they're frightening and dark and threatening.

MS. CARSON: Oh, goody. I'm Norwegian. I think that works.

MS. AYRES: That works.

MS. CARSON: Yes. Well, my grandfather was – I should have mentioned him earlier in my biography because he was a great influence. He lived with us after retiring. He was a little old Norwegian man who had worked for the Great Northern Railroad as an immigrant, and he painted. He must have painted at least 800 paintings before he died. He did his version of rosemaling painting which you see in Norwegian houses where they decorate all the beams and walls with these wonderful flowers. They're all kinds of squirmy and aggressive; and a lot of my paintings were influenced by his embellishing wood objects with all these wonderful kind of aggressive Norwegian designs. In Norwegian households they often have lots of clocks because they live in a culture in which daylight plays peculiar tricks. It's dark all winter and light all summer.

We had a lot of clocks in the house, my parents were very Lutheran and there was a lot of darkness in our family – not perverted, not crazy, not highly dysfunctional, but extremely anxious. Everybody in my family suffered from anxiety. I do, too. I think in the years I was making the clock paintings I was really honoring my anxiety disorder and putting it in the paintings. I wish I could do that now; really get some of the anxiety out.

They just have to do with life and death; biological clocks and flowers, and flames, and my own reflection. I think they had to do with almost everything that could ever make us nervous. Somebody asked me when they were in my studio on one of the Venice Art Walks, what the skulls meant. I just turned to her and I said, "Well, they mean death." What else could they possibly mean? And I realized that here's this chipper little woman all sort of duded up with her Armani suit and her lacquered hair, and she couldn't really take it. She couldn't take it in. I just told the whole crowd that I'm completely involved with death.

I'm involved with how I can make terrifying things - things that scare me. I mean, if a forest fire scares me, I make it beautiful. As an artist, one can transform ugly into beautiful objects, this is our job helping people acknowledge the good and the bad in the culture. When I saw Van der Weyden's *Deposition* painting in the Prado, I stood in front of it for one second before I started crying because it was so beautiful and so sad at the same time that I couldn't take in those polarities simultaneously, and enjoy the experience. That experience is hard to have, and you have to kind of let go to have it.

I think that's what I would like to have art now. And of course it's insane -- you can't go around to galleries these days and hope for these kinds of experiences. You can get them from films, and I can get them from watching a sunset, or from other more extended circumstances, but paintings are so limited in that sense. I think we don't have that kind of naiveté in front of paintings anymore.

MS. AYRES: For the sake of the tape I think I want to say we're talking about paintings: the large-shape wooden panels like *Recoil and Advance*, *Phoenix and the Ovaries*, *Flowers of Fate*. Would you please talk a bit about - I'm calling them ecological installations - *Hearth, Heart, Earth, Art* of 1992, and the large installation at LACE [Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions] called *It's a Small World*, both in 1992?

MS. CARSON: Well, the *Hearth, Art* piece -- I had found this fabulous old faux stone fireplace at the Salvation Army and I had fantasies of creating the ultimate over-the-mantel painting for suburban people, something to hang over their mantels that really connect them to some image that is comforting. We had a nice little farm landscape over our mantle while I was growing up, and you could watch the fire and look at this wonderful little painting.

I started making this huge piece. I guess the shape would be sort of like a stealth bomber or some big awful bat shape that swooped into the room. It had a Plexiglas dome attached with these angels flying around [inside it]. And it was winged like a great big moth that would fly into the room. I was teaching at Irvine in Orange County in those days and was in a perpetual rage over suburbia and all the boring restrictions of living that life. I made this thing as a kind of answer to that. Plus the L.A. riots happened when I was making this painting. When I put the grenades at the top of it and vultures sitting on it I wanted to use a lot of nasty clichés. Once again I wanted to show a fearful world that we really do live in with a lot of demons in our lives. I think some people expose those demons very well in social art and in films and they do it in a really direct way. I just wanted to do it in a kind of decorative way. I wouldn't be good at really believing that I could change anybody's mind about anything [by making a painting].

I thought that if I'm going to make something that reflects a worldview it might as well be something that makes you think things are wrong as opposed to knowing things are wrong. "Something's not right here." I never felt that I could be articulate enough to go around changing people's lives by making socially relevant art. But this is as close to a socially relevant painting as I've ever done insofar as it was about, in my head at least, intruding in the quietness of suburban life. So I had a nice, imaginative life built around it. I tried to show these people that life isn't good after all. Anyway, it was fun to make it and it was really a powerful-looking piece.

MS. AYRES: And why take on *It's a Small World* installation?

MS. CARSON: Oh, that one, the globes.

MS. AYRES: The "found" globes that you painted.

MS. CARSON: Yes, I remember the review I got on that show. It said that I wasn't as good as Disney. It was perceived as some kind of Disneyesque parody.

MS. AYRES: All based on that sticky little song, *It's a Small World After All*, something like that I guess.

MS. CARSON: Yes. Well, I shouldn't have titled the show *It's a Small World*. That was too leading. I'd never done an installation before and I didn't really do this thing with any idea of doing an installation. I just loved painting on these globes because it was back to the circular form and these were socially conceived images about weaponry and war and sex and AIDS and pollution. I guess I saw them a little bit as tattooed objects too because they had a little bit of that sense to them. They also had a little bit of psychedelic quality to them. I thought they were kind of explosive - they were the kind of form in which the imageries would explode if you pricked them with a pin. All the imagery would sort of saturate the air. I like the way they condensed the energy of pictorial imagery and sort of breathed it in and breathed it out. The angels on the wall; the mortals cavorting with the

angels sexually, really came out of AIDS [epidemic], life and death. It was just my attempt, once again, to make something really beautiful and playful out of things that were terrifyingly sad. I don't know; I don't know. What did you get from that particular show?

MS. AYRES: It's like a major cliché. It seems so beautifully over-the-top to just draw these dancing ...

MS. CARSON: Well, it's okay to cavort. Look at the Indian erotic imagery of their gods and goddesses. You realize that the constraint of the angel in Christian iconography is really a disappointment. When I made the paintings everybody was wearing angels [pins] on their lapels, and I was really quite tired of that. So I think that a lot of times I just answer clichés with clichés [parody]. Maybe that's a way to show people at large that the things they like that are clichés and are cute and can be transformed into serious art. Somehow, maybe it's like my way of trying to keep the dignity of people who I think have bad taste, by underlying their imagery and transforming it into something really serious. I think in my years of teaching and trying to be far more egalitarian as an artist looking at other people's art, I like to see that there's something responsible and interesting in almost everything if you transform it and give it some majesty or give it some impact.

I mean, I think I could probably take a ladybug and make it look. . . What I love about Lari Pitman's work is that he is able to take all these things and make them so compelling and valid. The owl -- what is more of a cliché? Every thrift store you go into has a thousand macramé owls and carvings --

MS. AYRES: Yes, it's also an archetype of Greek mythology.

MS. CARSON: Yes.

MS. AYRES: Well, it's the dichotomy that's forced between that which is comic and that which is serious. There's nothing, I think, more profound than that kind of serious laughter or comic profundity. You seem to be willing to reach for that, and that's a hard reach.

MS. CARSON: Yes, laughing through your tears.

MS. AYRES: It's so much easier just to be depressed or giddy.

MS. CARSON: I know. In those days I was teaching to make a living -- and I love teaching -- I had the energy that comes from being around the innocent. If I gave them an assignment about making a work of art, about some kind of socially important incident in their life -- bless their hearts, they always painted atomic bombs and dead babies. I'd tell them they had no relationship to that; they weren't even around when they were testing. When you're young you really want to be taken seriously, so they'd choose these really serious subject matters that had nothing to do with their lives.

MS. AYRES: I want to get back to drawing again, and I'm talking about ideas of romance and sexuality and vanity and death and the passages of middle age and the possibilities of the life of the spirit. Here is a collage under red Plexiglas that comes from the Menopause Series. This is called *War Babies with Clowns*. They have rather Baroque painted frames.

MS. CARSON: They are black and white drawings framed behind colored Plexiglas. They came out of those big clock paintings. They are combinations of tattoo imagery and Hallmark cards. The ones behind green Plexiglas with the war babies, dragons, bombs, and clowns, I saw as a melding of the Harley-Davidson culture and the Hallmark card culture. They were the juxtaposition of the two most extreme social images: the cute little bunnies and the demons with the flames and the skulls. That was also a way of, I guess, talking visually about what we daily live with which is the danger of sentiment, the danger of real life, the danger of conflict, and the resolution of all those fears into a beautiful visual object.

The green Plexi over these black-and-white drawings made them really haunted and almost like illuminated by toxic green light. The red Plexi I used to make the menopausal [series] were about transcendent middle-aged women.

[END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE A]

[SESSION 1, TAPE TWO, SIDE B]

MS. AYRES: [Was] '94 somewhat of a turning point for you in retrospect, or just another gig?

MS. CARSON: Well, I think anybody going to Las Vegas gets changed on one level or another, if not really changed, at least changed in attitude about the 20th century. Yes, it had an impact on me. It was a place that gave me permission to continue with some ideas that I already had. I think I will actually put this in this document. Coming off Valium and having an experience of intense fear and achievement and redemption and all the trials of kicking a medication habit.

That preceded teaching at Vegas [University of Nevada, Las Vegas]. Getting to Vegas and seeing that it was a place where people can forget the past and pay no attention to the future was a good way to re-acquaint myself with myself. All the diversions of Vegas actually helped me place myself in the moment much better. So it was a place that in some ironic way was meditative for me. I don't think it is that for a lot of other people because they're there for the excitement. I was there for the idea that the here-and-now can be a spectacular moment, and it's very easy to see it there.

It also had the kind of graphics and art and imagery that seemed to both validate and diminish a lot of big clock paintings. There's a skull chandelier at Treasure Island, a huge chandelier made out of fake human bones. It's a place in which there is every cliché in the book, presented visually and splendidly.

I enjoyed the idea that it was a permissive city. And of course, Dave Hickey was living there and he is the master of permission. He energized the art scene there with all of this so-called freedom. The students were interesting because they were good and they were really involved with Vegas, as opposed to the school. As visual artists they weren't hunkering into academia and not watching what the real world was about. I mean, the real fake world, which Vegas is. Vegas is the real world, but it's not the real world. It's the grand illusion. I think it's a good scene for young artists because they can see how much power there is in that kind of phenomena – the phony-boloney phenomena. Trying to put it over on other people, that's a good attitude for young artists.

It also gave me the kind of visual vernacular for making these banners, the soul banners. I was going to present something as corny and perplexing as the soul and the mind as opposed to the body and all the earthly pleasures of desire and accomplishments, what better place to create an antithetical image than Vegas? You can talk about the soul. Vegas tells you that you can. If you want to see it, make it. It was really easy to say, "Well, I'll just make a picture about the soul and have it be a visual text that has the excitement of a Vegas image." It worked. It was one of those moments in life where as an artist I realized that everything has come together to conspire a new language to use in my art – inspire and conspire, I guess.

That's where I came up with the image, the banner of *Birth Thank You, Death*. I was walking along the street aware that all people thought of out there was earthly gratification, that somehow we were born, we had a lot to indulge in and be thankful for and then we die. It was just very apparent, very clear.

MS. AYRES: And you called it a sandwich.

MS. CARSON: Well, the first image was just the text, and then I decided that it was such a heady Buddhist spiritual concept that I had to make a funny version too, so that's where the "Thank You" becomes baloney and the "Birth and Death" slices of bread. There's a serious version and then there's a funny version. But it was such a pleasing text piece for me that I still look at it – I even have a jacket with it on the back – it sums up what I should be, what I should recognize as the three great staples of human existence. I've learned that gratefulness is probably one of the healthiest human conditions there is. I don't think it's an easy one to grasp because we live in a culture of constant discontent. If Americans were grateful, they wouldn't go out and buy enough.

I made all these banners to remind myself of things that needed to be present in my life. They were not banners about who I am; they were banners to tell me who I should be, or could be, or might be.

MS. AYRES: And you called them *Simple Lessons* and *Easy Pieces*?

MS. CARSON: Yes, because they're very simple lessons and they're very easy conceptually, but they're not easy –

MS. AYRES: Difficult to put into practice.

MS. CARSON: They're very difficult to put in practice, yes.

MS. AYRES: Don't you feel that gratitude is a natural feeling, that you can't force it? I think that's the problem with gratitude a great deal; people are told to make gratitude lists or to be grateful. I remember the first time that I had a deep feeling of gratitude for something and it just overwhelmed me.

MS. CARSON: Yes. I think it's something that, for human beings ruled by desire, is a hard concept to find. But the most generous, kindly spirited, and most impressive people I've ever met are people who seem to be grateful for smaller things, and grateful for being alive. I'm always amazed that someone can say that they're just grateful to be alive. Are you really telling the truth because being alive is so scary?

That's the simplest thing. If you're alive, then good; that's it. That has been my favorite image from my whole artistic career. It is the only image that I think never had a single bit of doubt attached to it. It just was what it was, period, and that's all it needed.

MS. AYRES: I don't think people know the Hearts and Souls series very well, do you?

MS. CARSON: No, because a lot of people, including my husband, said, they never got those things. I don't know. I was trying to show my liberation from medication and the sudden fear of being in touch with my feelings. If you take Valium long enough you really don't pay that much attention to feelings. Incorporating these heads that turn from smiles to tears to rage, and then having them be centered with the soul, was about what happens when all of a sudden my life was open to so many feelings and my heart was raw. I was really trying to figure out, "How can I make art out of such a profoundly stimulating and kind of terrifying place to be?" Once again my way of handling that kind of deep sensation and those deep questions – to make something that's semi-funny and to put them on heart-shaped canvases. It was a way to, how should I say, lighten the load? I didn't continue those because I never quite figured them out But it's something I kind of regret because I think I could have made those things really insane and really interesting. But they were hard [to do].

MS. AYRES: I think you perhaps pushed your viewers about as far as you could push them with those pieces and the blatant use of the heart and then the applied eyes.

MS. CARSON: The google eyes.

MS. AYRES: The google eyes. It's a sure Karen Carson image because it jerks people around. They don't quite know –

MS. CARSON: Well, is it funny or horrible? I know. Yes, they weren't painted that well either because they were on canvas. I always hated those Jim Dine paintings, all those hearts. Hearts are as big a cliché as an angel is. And I did do those paintings with part of an idea, geez, if I can make hearts work, I can make anything work.

The thing is that I, for a brief moment in my life, wanted to see what it was like to try to make art out of feelings and look what I came up with. I think these forest fire paintings I'm making now will probably get the closest to how I'm feeling now, which is interesting because it drives me right back to the abstract expressionist idea that work is about feelings.

MS. AYRES: The banners were about feelings, but you distance yourself a little bit by casting them as advertisements.

MS. CARSON: Well, I thought that people would laugh. You can't get a group of people to talk about the soul to save your soul. At a dinner party, try putting that one out on the table. So I figured the only way I could talk about that would be to do it in an advertising framework, because advertising, if it can do anything, can at least subliminally convince, even if one fights back.

Those soul banners were a conscious rebuttal to the politics of identity and entitlement. I was tired of having people get or not get things for their ethnicity their skin color, or their gender. At that time everyone was splitting down the lines of who was entitled to make certain imagery and who wasn't entitled to. If you advertised the soul, I automatically released everybody from skin color and gender. I was just really sick to death of identity politics in the art world.

MS. AYRES: The horizontal banners that you did, *Invasion of the Modernist* and *The Language of Space*, how do they look to you now? Do they look a little contrived?

MS. CARSON: Yes, this looks real designy, but now that I look at it here –

MS. AYRES: It's handsome.

MS. CARSON: I actually like it better than I liked it when I did it, because I was basing those things on certain Renaissance paintings –

MS. AYRES: Piero [Piero della Francesca] in particular?

MS. CARSON: Yes. I think they were exercises in painting on banners and getting into this idea of the flattest kind of painting you could make.

MS. AYRES: And creating deep space.

MS. CARSON: And signifying deep space at the same time.

MS. AYRES: Also the eyes that they're no longer in the center but come at you from all positions in space.

MS. CARSON: Well, they were placed where figures in Renaissance paintings might have been looking out at the viewer. Everybody was talking a lot about the gaze in those days. I think these were about the viewer, looking at the artist, looking out. And I don't know that I ever resolved those ideas, but it was fun. I think I did two of these.

MS. AYRES: The one we're looking at is called –

MS. CARSON: *Invasion of the Modernist*. And of course it has Mondrian in it. He's one of my favorite artists. I used flat paint on a very flat surface, like those banners. I could create spatial perspective, by [graphic] line, because otherwise it's just flat. Get a black to sink back and a red to pop forward, but it's ultimately very flat. It was all about modernism.

MS. AYRES: Do you want to talk about the *Cradle to Grave*?

MS. CARSON: Yes, that's just another great big advertisement for birth, death, and the parachute down. I love this one. I like the arrows in it, because I got interested in arrows and I started using those in paintings. I'm still using them in paintings. I like arrows because they take the viewer and hit him on the side of the head. Look that way, look this way, look up, look down. Like, this way to the painting.

MS. AYRES: And when did you hit upon the light boxes? Did that grow out of thinking about advertising?

MS. CARSON: Yes. They had to do with a long love affair with beer signs in bars, Hamms Beer signs with the landscapes. I married someone from the country and was spending time there. Having to paint what I'm doing, I had to do landscapes; there was no choice. I had to come up with an idea for a landscape that was commercial or urban. I didn't want the romance of classic landscape painting. I didn't want anything sweet about it. Yet I know that it's the most traditional and beloved painting subject-matter for people. I decided to go with the popular concept of landscape; make it in materials that you'd see in bars and in store windows and in bus stops, etc., because it seemed like the best way to take landscape back to the city. They also have to do with a pun on impressionism, which is the painting of light. Instead of painting it you just plug it in. I think a nice way to modernize – to bring it into the 20th century you have to have electricity. That led to the banners of landscapes, which also have to do with advertising something as opposed to replicating it – I figured out that I made these big landscape banners because I was real lonely in nature. I think at the bottom of it, I was just sort of bent on making it beautiful and attractive enough to get people to come.

I designed these big banners that basically said, this is really great, come on over! They also are sort of generic, because I decided to use a limited number of symbols for trees, plants, hills, and clouds. I used a certain kind of scribbly lines and I had a tree, and a certain kind of pointed line, and I had a mountain; I didn't want to get into anything that was discreet about locations. It's back again to the idea of a popular image as opposed to a specialized image.

I think they worked well because the vinyl and the shiny enamel had so little to do with nature and it has so little to do with what people think nature is. We live where there's Disneyland and we live where there're all kinds of replications of nature. They aren't real and they're meant to attract us and to fool us and to trick us. It's all about advertising.

And now with these silk paintings of the forest fires, I'm kind of stepping back into a more traditional-looking image, and I don't quite know where I'm going with it. I have to go back up to Montana to figure it out.

MS. AYRES: Have we come full circle?

MS. CARSON: I don't know. Have we finished? I guess we have come full circle back again to what I'm doing now, which is really appropriate because I have come truly full circle. When I was a kid growing up in Oregon my first art class, aside from my mother's teaching, was a watercolor class where I did landscapes of old barns. The first time I ever thought of myself as a professional artist was sitting with an easel and painting old barns out in the fields. I hope I don't go back to where I was then. That would just be a shame.

MS. AYRES: I do think, though, you have a true respect for anyone who makes anything – conventional landscapes, regional painters, the passion and the curiosity involved, and wanting to look out in the world and make something of your vision and something that you would never be – make fun of.

MS. CARSON: I would never begrudge anybody that. In some ways Thomas Hart Benton's paintings make my flesh crawl and I really don't even actually like to look at them. But on some levels he really was getting it right. As a regional artist, he's completely far out. He was totally trained; he was not naïve and it was his training that made those paintings so particularly weird.

MS. AYRES: Yes, because he would draw on Renaissance tradition and mythology and cast farmers and dairymaids – and made some of the weirdest paintings ever created. And they don't belong anywhere on some levels, even though they're highly regional. They're sort of like from Mars. And I suspect if you live somewhere that's outside the imperial capitals and you know a lot and you try to make something out of what you know and also what you don't know, you have a good chance to make some pretty interesting art. But I don't think that's a very fashionable position to be in. Would you draw a distinction between the regional and the provincial art?

MS. CARSON: Well, I think, if you're regional you seek your permission from where you are and you take it and you live with it. Take some American painters, such as Charles Burchfield, they made amazing things out of being interested to be where they are. If you're provincial it's full of restrictions and questions and doing the right thing. It's not letting anything come in that would upset the rules you've gathered from your environment.

To some degree I think New York has become very provincial in the sense if you go there and you will find that artists look at things in terms of right and wrong, and I don't. I think if it's right, it's good, if it's wrong it can be good, if it's right and wrong at the same time it could be really good. I'm typical of the Western mentality that you have to do what you don't see, and if you don't see it, make it. And I wish I could always feel that way in the studio, because I don't. I'm like any artist who sometimes has a critic in the room with me and an audience and voices that I don't want to hear.

But one of the things that I miss in the art world now is highly regional constructions and positions. But I'm in Montana half of the year now where most artists are regional and the work that isn't interesting because they make the similar paintings of animals. It's as if the region of Montana can only be reflected by images of animals. That to me is the worst part of regionalism. It becomes totemic. Certain images are used as symbols and are not images that come from their actual environment and the minds of the artists.

MS. AYRES: Is there an accepted style, a kind of figurative expressionism?

MS. CARSON: Yes, it's a brushy bison and elk and, it's the kind of - Oh, what I said a few minutes ago about I would give anybody the right to do anything. There are people up there that do some really good paintings, but they are restricted by their regionalism. And it's provincial because this is what you make and this is the canon. The horse up there is the canon; everybody does horses. You can't go into a gallery without seeing horses everywhere. But for that matter, everywhere outside, too.

MS. AYRES: So you could posit a sort of mainstream realism for each area as its own tradition.

MS. CARSON: Yes, well, Seattle has the salmon; Santa Fe has the coyote and the chili pepper.

MS. AYRES: San Jose has assemblage

MS. CARSON: Right. Maine has the lobster. I mean, I'm talking about the true regional iconography. The stuff you buy in tourist shops reveal the culture to the tourist; the image you take home on a T-shirt.

MS. AYRES: Laguna Beach has the whale.

MS. CARSON: Yes. And it would actually be kind of an interesting show to combine all the 50 states' images.

MS. AYRES: Have you ever considered curating or organizing a show?

MS. CARSON: Yes, that would be fun.

MS. AYRES: You talk about the shows that you would enjoy seeing.

MS. CARSON: Yes, I'd love to do that, actually. It would be a kid show on some level, but if you could get a couple of pieces of art from those regions that are authentic, I mean, if you did get Morris Graves and then you got all those weird salmon paintings that Seattle people do it would be kind of interesting.

MS. AYRES: The technique is often very good in an academic sense.

MS. CARSON: Yes. What allows them to validate these emblematic paintings is that they are serious and well done. They don't have a conceptual edge to them. I mean, if you're going to paint horses you might as well look at George Stubbs; make the horse life-size. Really go for it. I told some painter in Livingston recently when we were out doing this art walk thing and we were looking at our hundredth bison painting, I said to her, "Can you imagine if someone would do a bison painting where the bison was 10 or 12 feet tall and 15 feet long, like the bison of all bisons?" She just looked at me like I was out of my mind. That would be the only way I could approach that sort of regionalism. Take it and puff it up and make it either more scary or more silly or more valuable, or whatever.

MS. AYRES: To push it over some kind of edge.

MS. CARSON: Yes, you'd have to.

MS. AYRES: Well, speaking of students, when teachers are hired at universities or art schools they're always asked what their pedagogy is and their theory of education. Can you give us a few terse comments on that?

MS. CARSON: Well, I've taught the same way I've made art, and from year-to-year I could never teach the same way that I taught the year before. When I was teaching in 1972 I did not teach the same way that I taught in the '90s. So as a teacher, my idea was that you go into the classroom bring the outside in. You do not personify the academic musings and traditions that stay in-house. You have to make sure that the students know their art should come out of their generation. There's no way that they're going to want to make the kind of work that I make. They have to be given enough technical guidance, introduction to a lot of art historical images, image finding and picture making, and then they go out and make something that I haven't seen before, that I might even actively disapprove of. All they want to do is kill the parent, so I play into that by allowing them to believe that I am not really teaching them that much, that they're learning a lot on their own.

MS. AYRES: You're assuming rightly that these are youngsters. Have you ever taught middle-aged people?

MS. CARSON: I would have middle-aged people sprinkled in some of the graduate courses and of course the advanced painting classes. They seemed to be the most intractable. It was always hard to look into that mirror. When I became middle aged, I found that I believe that I am right. They were the ones saying, "I don't know why you're giving me this assignment; I already know how to paint." Then I'd have to say, "Well, why are you in school then?" They would always be the most unhappy and most resistant to teaching. Once in a while you'd get a really good one. I just think students have the best kind of energy when they're little worker bees. A lot of them are horrific little slackers, but the good ones were no different from the good artists of my generation.

They all want the same things, they all like jokes, they all like having a good time, they would like to be famous, and they all like people liking their work. They want recognition, and they want to get laid. I mean, nothing changes. I mean, the music they listen to changes and the subject matter changes, but they want to create a very sexy life for themselves. I know this is so generalizing that there would be a thousand teachers and students who could read this and say, "Kill her." But they do want to feel important, and that's the bottom line of my teaching. I try to make them feel important, and me, too. There is nothing like feeling important.

END OF INTERVIEW

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