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Oral history interview with Roy De Forest, 2004 April 7-June 30

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Roy De Forest on April 7, May 26, June 30, 2004. The interview took place in Porta Costa, California and was conducted by Lynn Robert Matteson for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Roy De Forest and Lynn Robert Matteson have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written prose.

Interview

LYNN MATTESON: What was Nebraska was like, if you can remember?

ROY DE FOREST: Oh, I was very young. I don't remember too much about it but, you know, crawling around in the sand hills kind of very briefly in that sort of weird area. But most that I remember would be in the Northwest.

MR. MATTESON: In Yakima?

MR. DE FOREST: Yakima and so forth.

MR. MATTESON: Did you – why did your family move from North Platte to Yakima?

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, I think it's sort of the typical kind of '30s issue that farm – where we lost the farm we were working on. Sort of became migrant labor as it were and we ended up in Yakima. We brought some small establishment, farm as it were, and my dad and mom worked –

MR. MATTESON: Did they work apples?

MR. DE FOREST: No, they were – we had – for a while we had pears and plums and then I worked on that and then they worked off the farm. And I went to high school – I think I was intending to be an engineer or something in the sciences or something of that nature. And this little – small little high school, they lost their math teacher so they didn't have a college prep trig course, or algebra or something or other that I was scheduled for that quarter, and so I deferred some taking a couple math courses and I'd always liked to draw – you know, paint and so forth.

And I'm trying to remember. I took a high school art course and I got interested in painting and then got interested in art history mostly because I went to the really very small junior college and they had a sort of small library and there was an area where you could sit in the sun. I'd go up there to do work on equations and so forth and right behind me they had a couple bookcases of art books. They didn't have much. So in order to put off working on this, I'd look at the art books. [Laughter.] And by degrees the art books got to be more interesting than the math, although I still read books on mathematics and others. I'm more interested in the subject than I was as a student I think.

And then while I was in this course at this little high school, I won a poster for national apple week and that was big around Yakima. [Laughs.] And I got $40 or $50 I think and you could only spend it on art supplies. You know, I – we weren't really that well off and so I thought, boy, this is great. I went to Yakima and bought a lot of watercolors and paper and then I used that up finally after

about six months and I thought, well, I – then I had this part-time job, so I kept buying the stuff and doing stuff with it and it naturally, organically came together and I finally decided what's the point in flogging my brain when I'm working like hell and I only get a C-plus. If I slave all night, I'll maybe get a B-minus in math. And what am I doing this for? Maybe I should do something that I can do easily, or more easily I should say.

So I took another art course, but they really weren't available at this junior college and I started to get involved with general courses. I thought, maybe I'll be a history teacher or something rather than an engineer. And I kept making – doing little paintings. I liked Edward Hopper, I think, at the time and I did little landscapes based on Edward Hopper. I kind of jazzed the color up a little bit.

MR. MATTESON: Those are such sort of empty, severe landscapes.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, mine were never quite that – kind of a cross between Edward Hopper and Charles Burchfield. I love all those guys. And I sent away to the Kansas City Art Institute and I got a scholarship, which I never took because my dad died that fall and the family was in an uproar and so I missed out on that. And then I sent – I applied – I sent some stuff to the – what's called the San Francisco Art Institute now, but was the California School of Fine Arts, and got a scholarship, which I took, which wasn't as good as the one in Kansas City, but on such little things, you know, turn the world. I could have been some sort of Thomas Hart Benton with –

MR. MATTESON: You could have worked at the card factory in Kansas.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, actually Kansas City is a good art school and I was – I went – many years later I gave a talk there and stayed there three or four days and met a lot of people. As you well know, at Davis we had quite a number of graduates in our – from the Kansas City Art Institute.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, that I didn't know. I didn't know that.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, John Buck and, you know, Debbie Butterfield. Debbie wasn't from the Kansas City Art Institute but John was.

And so I got – I went to the California School of Fine arts just as the – you know, a couple – the beat movement, the beat generation was opening up.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, I'm coming to that in a second. I wanted to know whether or not the move from Nebraska to Yakima, whether the actual move – in so many of your paintings deal with journeys – if you remember that.

MR. DE FOREST: Well, yes. What I remember is being on the road. We had this old Model-T and we drove it all the way and we drove around and kind of lived in camps and picked pears and that's – I remember being on the road like Jack Kerouac.

MR. MATTESON: Like Jack Kerouac? Grapes of harvest? Grapes of Wrath [1940]?

MR. DE FOREST: Well, it was such a pain in the ass, right. You kind of sleep on the ground and so forth, but that aspect of it – yeah. That's sort of basic. And obviously I'm not Red Grooms and that's the reason. You know, he – around New York City. And I saw a lot of the Western landscape and I – you know, I've – art's really more about that than – in the background than certain other ideas and I came back to that.

MR. MATTESON: So you go from Yakima to San Francisco, which like must have been going to the

other side of the moon. I mean –

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, it was. At the time, yeah.

MR. MATTESON: That's what, 1950? Nineteen –

MR. DE FOREST: Nineteen fifty, '58, '55. I'd have to go down and dig up a bio bit.

MR. MATTESON: I think I have 1950.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, well, this – yeah, '48 I was – in 1948 I was in junior college, so it's probably around 1950.

MR. MATTESON: So what was San Francisco like in –

MR. DE FOREST: Well, it was a big shock for me. And I remember going to the San Francisco Museum the first weekend I got there and I'd never seen – Grace L. Morley had basically acquired quite a few really impressive paintings – European paintings and some South American stuff and I was very impressed by that. And as I say, I got to know her later because I worked in the place.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, you did?

MR. DE FOREST: Oh yeah, for years. I knew John Humphrey and one day – to digress – I'd been working there for quite a while and Herbert Ferber's sculpture fell on me when I was trying to install it. So I turned to John and I said, "This is my last day." [Laughter.] I'm not going to let a bad piece of sculpture [laughs] lay me out. And things picked up later. I got a – you know, a little bit later I got a teaching job and never looked back, but I worked there for, oh, three or four years.

Robert Morris, the sculptor, used to work in a basement with me, so I knew him through that. I didn't know much –

MR. MATTESON: This is when he was at the Veteran's Center?

MR. DE FOREST: Veteran Center. They had a – worked down in the basement and catacombs.

MR. MATTESON: Un-air-conditioned, as I recall.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, we used to go up on the roof to eat lunch. It's a great building. I love that old place.

MR. MATTESON: So do I.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, in fact I love those exhibition rooms. It's – the architects now tend to want you to hang art inside a piece of sculpture, and that has some problems and that has some problems. I think a gymnasium is closer to the ideal for hanging work.

MR. MATTESON: Well, the light – as I recall, the lighting was pretty even.

MR. DE FOREST: The lighting was absolutely beautiful.

MR. MATTESON: Because it was glass and it was high and it was –

MR. DE FOREST: And I met – oh, Julius Wasserstein was working there and I met him at the Art

Institute. And John Humphrey was the curator – a very nice man.

MR. MATTESON: Nice man.

MR. DE FOREST: Very knowledgeable, self-taught, and I got on very well with him. And there's something about working with art that – day-by-day that really teaches you something in an art history sense. A piece of art that looks attractive when it goes up may not look as attractive 30 days later when you take it down.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, that's true.

MR. DE FOREST: And something that doesn't look too interesting –

MR. MATTESON: Well, I can recall Pollock working for Peggy Guggenheim for a long time in New York when he was nobody. And the same thing, because his art was invested very much with art history.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, we had a nice Pollock at the – at the San Francisco Museum.

MR. MATTESON: Guardians of the Secret. [1943]

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, yeah – beautiful painting.

MR. MATTESON: Given by Peggy Guggenheim.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah. Actually, Peggy Guggenheim used to stay with Grace L. McCann Morley –

MR. MATTESON: Is that so?

MR. DE FOREST: – when she came to San Francisco, and apparently – I'm told that Peggy Guggenheim had something to do with her getting a job at some museum in India after she left here. They were about the same age and she was an interesting lady –

MR. MATTESON: Morley?

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, kind of a little cold. I remember when I was working there they had this fire at the Museum of Modern Art.

MR. MATTESON: That's right. The Monet was almost burned.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, and somehow I think – actually one of the gallery assistants was killed.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, I didn't know that.

MR. DE FOREST: And she lined us all up and said, "You know, the worse – you could do worse than die for art." [Laughter.] She didn't really have a sense of humor, but as John said, she had a certain kind of scale.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah. So when you went to the – when you got to the School of Fine Arts there, whatever it was called, who was there? Who was teaching?

MR. DE FOREST: Well, Clyfford Still had just left, and I only met Clyfford Still at an opening and he – his shadow hung over the whole place. And to a large extent in many ways my attitude and what I

did in art later in the Bay area had to do with a – being interested in Clyfford Still at first and gradually seeing the problems with his metaphor. And, you know, then eventually abandoning and making a real effort to have – to do something that had as little to do with him –

MR. MATTESON: As possible?

MR. DE FOREST: – as possible. But I did meet Hassel Smith, who had a big influence, you know, as a teacher. I wanted better teachers in painting. I –

MR. MATTESON: I recall Hassel Smith, having spent – I think, at Davis. The Art Institute –

MR. DE FOREST: He was working at Davis, yes.

MR. MATTESON: He came over for a quarter I think.

MR. DE FOREST: He came over for a quarter. And I remember Richard Crozier – you remember Richard Crozier?

MR. MATTESON: I sure do. I have one of his works.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes – marvelous little painter. Hassel and I spent that whole quarter trying to get Richard to slightly change the color in the foliage.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, I see.

MR. DE FOREST: As we'd say. You know – you know, trees have many colors. [Laughs.]

MR. MATTESON: Did it work?

MR. DE FOREST: Eventually I think, but long after, you know, we had anything to do with him. He –

MR. MATTESON: I remember Richard selling his stuff for nothing. I mean, I picked one up for $25.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, I have one downstairs he gave me. He had a lot of – interesting student. He carved that skeleton.

MR. MATTESON: I didn't know that.

MR. DE FOREST: Oh yeah. He carved a complete skeleton – really interesting student.

MR. MATTESON: He went on to?

MR. DE FOREST: University of Virginia and became chair.

MR. MATTESON: Right.

MR. DE FOREST: And he got that job because he was – he stayed there during the summer and University of Virginia had an opening and for some reason they called Davis and Jeannie Martin or Jeanne Bernauer called him in. He was the only student around, so he got that job at the end of the summer.

MR. MATTESON: Actually, that's how I got my job at Davis. It was the same way exactly. That's –

MR. DE FOREST: [Laughter.] That's another story.

MR. MATTESON: That's another story.

MR. DE FOREST: I'm losing my train of thought. Elmer Bischoff took classes from Hassel [?], and a good teacher – a neat guy. I got to know him quite well.

MR. MATTESON: I read somewhere that Hassel used to have sort of open houses or seminars at his place.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, I attended those.

MR. MATTESON: You went to them?

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, he did – after he got fired at the Institute –

MR. MATTESON: Oh, I didn't know he was fired.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, well Ernest Mundt – I don't know if he was a – I guess the head and Ernest was – who I got to know later; I took classes from – was kind of a more or less out of the Bauhaus tradition, as well he might be being German. And he thought that the art school was having enrollment problems and he thought maybe it should be switched towards a more design approach. I guess there's logic for that. And all the rest of the people there were in memory of Clyfford and – who was the guy who had Alzheimer's? Douglas MacAgy.

MR. MATTESON: Douglas MacAgy, yes.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, was an important figure starting that and –

MR. MATTESON: Right. He was director of the school.

MR. DE FOREST: Director, yes. And he and his wife were director.

MR. MATTESON: She worked at the Legion of Honor.

MR. DE FOREST: The Legion of Honor and then he got another job and they left the area and still left the area and so that was – I think Bischoff stayed on because Elmer was a lot more diplomatic, you know, and then Elmer later moved to Berkeley and a good teacher. I've not a quarrel with Elmer. Hassel probably had more influence on me – Hassel was a very bright guy.

MR. MATTESON: He was a – he studied art history before he became a painter.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, he studied art history at Northwestern, and a very bright guy. He did have a sense of humor. He had very cranky ways of looking at things and that – I liked that. You know, he was into more I think anybody else there he was into – he realized that if you took some alternative viewpoint, that that was okay.

And like I knew David Park there, but it wasn't as though – David was a nice man, a good teacher, but he – they – he was a little bit more committed into what he was doing and you could do things with Hassel and he didn't have any – he wouldn't clamp down on it. You know, if you didn't want to paint like this or that. He had a kind of an open mind and always did – a strange kind of odd guy.

MR. MATTESON: What did you talk about? What kind of things would – would it be a book that you

talked about or was it just an open-ended discussion?

MR. DE FOREST: Well, he [Hassel] affected my teaching a lot later – his style – and it's – I don't know whether it's my personality or I adopted some of his ideas. He came in one day with a huge pile of newspapers and he wadded them all up to about eight feet high and he says, this is our drawing in still life today. And I thought that was great, you know, as a way to – and – to get people to look at that material and try to draw it. And it had a certain real merit.

And he had a lot of sayings. He'd say that painting has in interior logic – that if you look at it, it's referential to itself, but that's the only logic it has. It's not about doing science or it's not about color calculation; it's not about mathematics. He was always very strong on that. But it does have an interior logic and it's good to try to get all that working in the microcosm in painting, and that was his idea. He gave a little talk on that once; that what you were doing was building another little world to set up against the real world, and that seemed to me to be a really –

MR. MATTESON: – Pretty much what seems to be your style.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, that – his ideas were just in a happenchance related to my bent of thinking anyhow.

MR. MATTESON: I read somewhere where he said that his art didn't reflect life, it was an addition it.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, he kept saying that. The whole group of them – that was the concept; that creating a new world – a microcosm. I don't know if I – I got so I didn't – that structure wasn't necessary for me and I painted abstractly – what you'd call abstract expressionist and – but for a student – and then when I was on my own, I started to invert the whole – they started to look like rugs.

I had a friend – I'm trying to think of his name now – who went to Stanford and a very good designer. And he worked out a way to squeeze the tube of paint and then he'd slice it off when I started squeezing paint and sort of pointillist situation. I did a lot of early paintings that look like Persian rugs basically and it'd be like – it occurred to me – and it did look like landscapes looked at from a plane and so I gradually inverted the landscape up and added figuration to it floating around.

MR. MATTESON: Is that – the stuff I've seen is – the work I've seen has been – it's not till the later '50s that you start to begin to do that.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes. Yes. I did – right, it was – around 1960 I started to – I'll show you a drawing in the back room.

MR. MATTESON: Sure. Sure.

MR. DE FOREST: We can –

[Audio break.]

MR. MATTESON: Such a confusing instrument.

MR. DE FOREST: It's really –

MR. MATTESON: I hear you this way, so we must be recording, but – okay, I think we're recording.

So, you were saying about Mondrian and arguing with Hassel.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, and I think I still – strangely enough, the influence of Mondrian is still there to this day – the way he'd arrange things around the canvas. And I – reading art history about him, he's an enormously kind of interesting guy. And I was getting a little dubious of certain attitudes of Clyfford Still anyhow, particularly his statement – it seemed to me to be a very kind of protestant, uptight, religious attitude that I didn't really want to be associated with. And Mondrian, who was just as committed to what he was doing didn't seem to take this – this attitude.

And when I left the Institute, I went out to San Francisco State to get a degree and one of the people who was teaching out there was John Guttmann, the photographer.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, I remember him.

MR. DE FOREST: And I took his class on art history and it was really the best art history class I ever took. An enormously interesting man and I got to arguing with John – I got to really – over a period of years, I got to really have a lot of respect for him and like him. And he had a strange form of lecturing. I was at the time not living too high on the hog, as it were, and was a sort of moody and he had to have response from his class before he could continue a point.

And one – I'd always known all through my taking of classes was you'd figure out how, as well as you could, the instructor thought. So if you had to answer test question, I'm sure you've had that same experience. Anybody that goes to a lot of – takes a lot of classes does, so you don't waste a lot of time.

And so John used to say, "Please, Mr. De Forest," he says, "Tell us whether –what I'm comparing this work to." And I'd say – "Oh, it was an Egyptian painting and I said you're obviously referring to Jackson Pollock." Now, in reality – this is the reason the other students couldn't answer the question – is I didn't think it was any real relationship except I knew he thought so.

MR. MATTESON: I see.

MR. DE FOREST: And so that's the answer he wanted.

MR. MATTESON: I see. I see.

MR. DE FOREST: And so I answered the question and he would complete it. And I would go up – I was living in downtown and I'd catch the bus back and if he rolled by, he'd see me and pick me up and we'd start talking about art. And he was very skeptical of Clyfford Still and I still had kind of a little admiration for him. One day it came to me: I says, well, John Guttmann's right. The objections he has to Clyfford Still I think I share, and so then completely he had a – John had that influence on me of completely moving me from that abstract expressionist attitude and that's when I decided to do something that was maybe insignificant – that the mood was not heavy duty and protestant. And so that had a lot to do with what I did. Like that drawing, you know, of that French cavalier over there.

So it occurred to me like Paul Klee, it didn't really matter too much, you know, what you're – the mood that you were laying down was, as long as you did it really well. And I gradually moved in that direction. You might call it humor in art or just being open-minded. And there was an enormous kind of heavy-duty protestant ethic, and Frank Lobdell I think typified that very much. I thought if I start painting in water based paint – acrylic – it won't look like Clyfford Still's painting, and it did change things, so I did a lot of things just really to remove myself from that arena.

MR. MATTESON: I know somewhere John Fitz Gibbon, in his exhibition catalogue, in the chronology, the exhibition catalogue that he did in for – it was 1990 – he has somewhere that for political reasons you moved away – I mean, he – that's his term, "political reasons" –

MR. DE FOREST: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: – You moved away from the thick painting of abstract expressionism towards a lighter, thinner –

MR. DE FOREST: Well, I did for a while and then I added little glumps of paint widely separated, so that as – Allan Frumkin picked that up and he said, "Well, you're making a pastiche of this." He said I – and after I got involved with Allan Frumkin – Allan can be a difficult person to get along with, but he did really love art and he would show you – I remember the first time I met him, I met him at an opening. I was going to have a show actually with – oh, my mind.

MR. MATTESON: Martha Jackson?

MR. DE FOREST: No, I did show at – the first place I ever showed in New York was at a group show at Martha Jackson.

MR. MATTESON: I was going to ask you about that. It's pretty impressive.

MR. DE FOREST: New media – that's back when I was a student. Allan Stone.

MR. MATTESON: Allan Stone.

MR. DE FOREST: And I had these animal constructions – I've always had a sculptural – interest in sculpture – and it wasn't too different from this drawing in the sense you have an animal on top and kind of a plaque and I liked them. And so I had about 10 of them and Allan had said, "Well, I'll have a show. I like your work and I'd been doing some painting," so I thought, "Well, these will be even better."

I went out to the Oakland Army surplus and got five surplus Army dog cages and I shipped three of those to New York and I thought, well, he'll even like that, but as it turned out he didn't like any of them. So –

MR. MATTESON: That's Allan Stone –

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, Allan Stone, he cancelled the show.

MR. MATTESON: I see. [Laughs.]

MR. DE FOREST: And later I met Allan Frumkin at one of the Dilexi openings, because I had a showing with Jim Newman at Dilexi, which is a whole other story. And he said, "Well, I'd like to put you in a group show," and he started in a way handling my work although it took him a number of years. I had a long kind of relationship with Allan over a period of about five years – not being in the gallery, but showing once in a while.

So he took it on and when he did I was with him for many years.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. DE FOREST: I just came back last fall from doing an oration at his memorial, and so I was with

him 25 or 30 years.

MR. MATTESON: Now, in 1953 you had a show. I wanted to ask you about this because it's really interesting. You showed at the King Ubu gallery.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: What can you tell me about the King Ubu gallery?

MR. DE FOREST: Well, that – I was actually showing –

MR. MATTESON: You did the poster for the show.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, I was showing at Mrs. Gechtoff's across the street – Sonia Gechtoff's mother. And my relation to the King Ubu came because when I was at the Institute I took this class from Hassel about three-dimensional design. I happened to sit down right next to a guy – just happened to do that – I got to know a Jess Collins.

MR. MATTESON: Yes.

MR. DE FOREST: And we'd sit there and we'd chat. And Jess really was an interesting guy – really bright. And he became very reclusive, but at that time it was a great learning experience for me because he – after about the whole quarter he said, "Roy," he said, "A friend of mine and I are having a party. Why don't you come over?" So I came over. It was the first time I ever saw guys dancing with each other and I was right off the farm.

MR. MATTESON: Welcome to San Francisco.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, and that was really a learning experience.

MR. MATTESON: Sure.

MR. DE FOREST: And I got to know Robert Duncan pretty well and –

MR. MATTESON: That was his lover – excuse me, partner.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, yeah. And Jess got to be a recluse, but I'd meet him every once in a while, so I knew him for years – really bright guy and very interesting and he became a recluse.

I introduced my son Pascal to him because he was interested, but he saw him one day in the San Francisco Museum and Pascal, who paints, was interested in his work. And so that led me into the King Ubu.

MR. MATTESON: Because they ran that – Duncan and he and –

MR. DE FOREST: Well, I'll take that back. The King Ubu was unique. I was thinking then of the Six Gallery that Jess was in. The King Ubu was a short-lived gallery. I think – who started that?

MR. MATTESON: I have it down as Duncan, and someone else –

MR. DE FOREST: Harry –

MR. MATTESON: Jacon? Jescon? And Harry somebody.

MR. DE FOREST: Harry Jacobus?

MR. MATTESON: That's it. Jacobus.

MR. DE FOREST: Jacobus. Yes. And that's the reason. Because I know Jess – I got sort of involved in it and it was a funny interesting gallery. About that time I left for the Army and so missed a lot of that and when I got back, it had changed. And then Wally Hedrick organized it and took it over as the Six – six painting – there were six people that contributed money every month for keeping the thing going.

MR. MATTESON: I see.

MR. DE FOREST: And it was basically a garage. So I contributed money to it. I don't think I ever other than being in group shows have had a show there, but, well, what was it, $10, $20 a month?

MR. MATTESON: Well, from Jess, were you at all sort of introduced or made aware of the surrealist thing in literature or any of that?

MR. DE FOREST: Well –

MR. MATTESON: Duncan –

MR. DE FOREST: I don't know if I had those discussions with Jess, but it was obvious he was really interested in Clyfford Still, but he started to cut up old phone books and do those collages, which were out of surrealism. And I spent – of course, because I grew up without television, I've always been a reader and I – from reading I got very interested in the surrealism.

MR. MATTESON: About this time? Around the '50s?

MR. DE FOREST: When I was a student – all through that.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, really?

MR. DE FOREST: And I remember – what many people don't know is that Mondrian himself had said except for what he was doing he thought that surrealism was a very substantial movement in modern art.

MR. MATTESON: I didn't know that.

MR. DE FOREST: So I got interested in that and aspects of it still influence what I do in a major way.

MR. MATTESON: Do you – did you do – did you read the poetry or –

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, yes. Yeah. Hassel was interested in surrealism too, very much.

MR. MATTESON: I see.

MR. DE FOREST: And in that seminar you referred to he ran over material like that.

MR. MATTESON: I see.

MR. DE FOREST: And – I mean, that was Guttmann. John Guttmann was – he ran a movie – I only saw a few of them because I went to work at some place and missed it, but he ran a great film

program and he was real interested in surrealism.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, that was – when I was a high school student, I used to go to those things in San Francisco [State] that Guttmann ran.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, very good.

MR. MATTESON: It was fabulous.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah.

MR. MATTESON: It was my introduction to movies.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes. John was really Germanic, but underneath all that a really interesting and –

MR. MATTESON: And a good photographer.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes and when I first came, he was really a painter and that is where his interest was. He'd taken up photography solely to get a job when he left Germany – got out of Germany. I think, as far as I can tell from talking to him, it was basically for political reasons. He just didn't like the Nazi party and so he decided he had to leave. And so he worked up some job representing some German – a couple German magazines and he said, "I didn't know damn about photography, but I brought a Nikon or a German camera and"– you know, he said, I read the manuals and it didn't seem to be too hard. And he said, "I just took what interested me," and he said, "You know, those are the best photographs I ever made."

And he became – he took photographs, but when I first came to San Francisco State he was seriously regarding himself as a painter. And now I think his photography had begun to be taken fairly seriously, so then he moved out of painting entirely and considered himself a photographer.

One of the great things about John – over many years he came to all of my openings and always with a really gorgeous looking girl. You know, I knew him for a long, long time. I would say also Hassel – probably, as I look back, was one of the major teaching influences on me.

MR. MATTESON: That so?

MR. DE FOREST: I didn't realize it until later. And he would have gotten me – his courses and his attitude, he was very interested in the whole surreal –

MR. MATTESON: San Francisco State was really a sort of interesting place because you had Guttmann and you had Ruth Witt-Diamant with the Poetry Center and Duncan at the Poetry Center too and there was a lot of activity. Was the art school as active?

MR. DE FOREST: It was – a guy, Seymour Locks taught sculpture that I took a lot of classes from – a good teacher. Alexander Nepote, we used to take classes from him – a very nice man. I don't know if he was a profound painter or anything, but a good guy. And I met people like Sam Tchakalian and –

MR. MATTESON: He just recently died.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah. Yeah. Hadn't gotten along too well with Sam for years, but he – various other people. Dennis Beals, a printmaker. And then I went in the army.

MR. MATTESON: I was going to ask you, where were you stationed and what did you do?

MR. DE FOREST: I was at Ft. Lewis, Washington, and I was a sign painter.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, I spent my eighth and nine year in south Tacoma because my stepfather was stationed at Ft. Lewis in '48, '49.

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, that's interesting. Yeah.

MR. MATTESON: He shipped out at the time of the Korean War, and that's when we returned to Stockton.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, Tacoma wasn't much of a place. It was wet.

MR. MATTESON: That's all I can recall is wet.

MR. DE FOREST: I remember it being humid and wet.

MR. MATTESON: And gray.

MR. DE FOREST: But the summer was nice.

MR. MATTESON: So you were a sign painter.

MR. DE FOREST: A sign painter. We used to go up to the Yakima firing center, which is way up in the hills –

MR. MATTESON: That's where the maneuvers used to be.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, that's where I used to paint signs and paint in really cold, bitter weather. You'd paint –

MR. MATTESON: So you were with the Second Division?

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, the engineers. I was in an engineering outfit. And then after I got out of the army, I got some job for a year teaching at a steel plant and could see there was no future in that and that's when I went out to San Francisco State.

MR. MATTESON: Did you – in 1955 you were in the first Ferus Gallery exhibition in Los Angeles – Ferus Gallery.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, as I was saying before you turned on the recorder, I met a friend of mine who worked in a bookstore at the San Francisco Museum, a strange guy called Ralph Case. [Inaudible.] Walter [Hopps] came up to the museum bookstore on Sunday and I started talking to him and he said he wanted to meet some San Francisco artists.

Now, he and James Newman had been involved as music promoters in Los Angeles in a so-called merry-go-round show which was this old building in the merry-go-round. They put paintings up to go with some of this musical production they had, and Jim was a musicologist actually by training. And this – a whole bunch of very hilarious stories about Walter. I don't know if they're true, but I'll repeat it – one or two. The first gallery they ever had was they had in L.A. a little kind of garage called the Sendal Studios, so the story is he and Jim Newman were driving back from Kansas City or something, so ran over an old guy crossing the road around the bend who happened to be called

Maurice Sendal. So I don't know how badly it banged him up, but that was in memory of the farmer that ran into Sendal Studios.

MR. MATTESON: That's funny.

MR. DE FOREST: And then of course Walter got involved with starting the Ferus and I knew a lot of those people. I wasn't a Ferus first string, no. Walter always – strange enough – always liked my work, but there was another arm to the whole thing and then of course Irving Blum got involved and Irving's interest – he – as Walter said, he comes from modern design. He'd been a salesman for modern furniture. [END TAPE 1, SIDE A] – and the goofy part of that combination was Walter not Irving, who had his – has his merits, but never as extreme or never involved with the surreal.

Mostly Irving's concepts were in design or Stella, minimalism, it wasn't – he wasn't I don't think, involved in literature of the –

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, Hopps was a real, you know, creative scholar in many ways.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, he was a great speaker.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, I never heard him speak.

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, Gloria – I took Gloria to the San Francisco Museum to hear him speak and she says, "This is amazing." She said, "Roy, most of the people you take me to hear are old and burnt out" – and Walter, well into his 30s, but very dapper. And he used strange similes. He used to use in this lecture – quote some James M. Cain and early – you know, California novelist and really entertaining speaker.

I've always thought that he for some reason wasn't or didn't do a lot of writing or he'd be much better known if he'd had the – you know, great – I could never understand it because he's great guy to talk to – absolutely entertaining. A friend of mine and I went back for some reason, we were in Washington, D.C. I'd been in a show in New York. Allan Frumkin or something and I went with a friend and we went down to Washington to do something, or maybe I – and I called Walter. He met us in this bar that Jackie Kennedy had gone to. I'm trying to remember the name. It had something to do with horses. And we set there –

MR. MATTESON: What year was this?

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, god, that was a long time ago. I'd have to do some research. See, Walter had – was working for the – I think the Museum part of the Smithsonian with Joshua Taylor was his boss for a bit.

MR. MATTESON: Yes. That's right.

MR. DE FOREST: And we –

MR. MATTESON: Was it the Hirshhorn?

MR. DE FOREST: He worked for the Hirschhorn for a while, but I think this was he was working for the National Museum – the portrait gallery. Joshua Taylor was his boss –

MR. MATTESON: I see. That's right, yes.

MR. DE FOREST: – at that time and we talked for two and a half hours and then we went to dinner with Walter and we talked for another hour and a half and I got some really strange tales from Walter, particularly about Irving – all about his life. We don't need to go into that, but it's interesting – very interesting.

MR. MATTESON: Okay.

MR. DE FOREST: And then lately – a strange thing: at Allan Frumkin's memorial I met James Demetrion, which I'd heard about, who turned out to be a really pleasant guy and very talking – we got to talking about Walter and he said, "I have done something no one else has done." He said, "I was boss of Walter and then he was my boss." And he said, "I was able to get along with him all that time" and he says that shows something about my personality.

His big problem with Walter – everyone complained, you know, that he just wouldn't show up for work.

MR. MATTESON: He was eccentric.

MR. DE FOREST: Very eccentric – very, very.

MR. MATTESON: But the best.

MR. DE FOREST: But a guy that I always really thoroughly entertained and liked, I think – I'm getting water because I'm getting a little dry.

MR. MATTESON: You went to – you got your MFA at San Francisco.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah.

MR. MATTESON: Then you went back to Yakima. Why?

MR. DE FOREST: I – well, I got a job, and the jobs were hard to get, and I'd gone to the junior college there and they needed a teacher so I applied. Being an ex-student, I knew this lady art administrator who I wrote to and so she got me this job there at Yakima J.C. And that was – they had this gallery and I was museum director and taught about every damn day an art class. Some lady had tried to work up a full program and so she had every class in the book. And the first two years I taught there and later I got fired for nothing, it's a political issue, not for competence. And it was – I've always said that teaching at Yakima and teaching at San Quentin, which I did, were my training in academic politics. And both those places stood me in good stead when I – the only problem was they were so bizarre that you couldn't use all you learned.

Yakima itself, the two years I spent there were just incredible.

MR. MATTESON: In what way?

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, we could talk for, you know, a couple hours about all the –

MR. MATTESON: Was it students or the faculty?

MR. DE FOREST: I met some interesting students – faculty, but the social circumstance in Yakima was really strange.

An old friend, Gaylen Hansen, a Northwest painter, was just stopped and stayed here and he had

been at Yakima about two or three years before I did and then he went to Washington State and he's pretty well known in the Northwest. We sort of kept in touch and he does – I don't know if you know his work, but –

MR. MATTESON: No

MR. DE FOREST: – it's animal paintings and he does very well in the Northwest. He's shown in Germany and Europe – I mean Europe, and he had a show in New York – a couple of them.

MR. MATTESON: And you came – you did a painting, which I've never seen but I've seen a reproduction of it, called My Life and Times in Yakima [?].

MR. DE FOREST: My Life and Times in Yakima. It's at Yakima Public Library.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, I see. What was intended – I mean, what was – was this the first time that your painting became autobiographical, or –

MR. DE FOREST: Well, I – it was all over kind of taking a trip and I knew this wonderful man, James Garretson, who is this Jewish guy who was an apple grower. He actually – a good businessman, but then he began to drink a lot I think I his last few years or something, and he – this person I talked to there, they had this gallery guild around the – this little museum that's attached to the junior college. I directed the gallery and then I met – you had a whole social kind of obligation to deal with all these people – older ladies – and it was a bizarre and surreal undertaking, the whole thing.

And I met a guy that taught Spanish and French, Dr. Charles Hilton, and he got his doctorate at the University of Mexico and became kind of a drinking crony – a real intellectual and he also had a lot of influence on the attitude I took towards teaching. We used to drink in the winter there. Snow on the ground, we drank this wine called Old Smiley, which was apple. And I learned a lot from old Charles – an amazingly interesting man – had been to three or four universities and ended up at this junior college.

MR. MATTESON: And then you came to San Francisco?

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, I came – I came back trying to find a job and I worked various little places – a place in Oakland and a junior center for arts and sciences – taught children's classes. And then I got a job through a friend of mine, Jeff Bowman – a guy retired from San Jose State in printmaking – teaching at San Quentin – the night classes. And then I got this job – that ended and I got this job in what's called the Adjustment Center. The Adjustment Center is a jail in a jail, and so I – when you – on the main line, you get into trouble, they send you to this center called the Adjustment Center, and later it became death row. And I had about two students I started out with and ended up with about 15. That was too many. Interesting, interesting experience.

MR. MATTESON: Did you ever feel threatened?

MR. DE FOREST: Not really, but one thing I did learn – and you did this very fast – that when you said anything, and this carried over through all my teaching later, you had to be very careful that you didn't have any paranoia in your pronouncements. You didn't take – verbally you didn't set a tone because if you did, they would – they were right up there – ears would go up. So you learned to make everything even-handed. If you're going to say something loud, you know, you – it just affected everything you did.

MR. MATTESON: Interesting.

MR. DE FOREST: And you'd have dreams. My friend Jeff Bowman told me this – and the lights would go out so you'd jump under the table and then you'd hear the inmates beating on the top. Now, none of that took place, but in this room in the adjustment center you had this glass door that you looked through and there was this mattress that's all ripped apart and bloody, and that part was a little frightening. They'd leave you there with – you were supposed to hit a fire alarm if you got in trouble, but I made sure I didn't get in any trouble.

MR. MATTESON: I always thought when I was a graduate student in art history that it would be interesting to go to San Quentin – and specifically I was thinking of San Quentin – to teach an art appreciation class and see what the reactions would be from people like that, what they thought of van Gogh or, you know, painters of – that had a lot of –

MR. DE FOREST: Well, I did do that actually, because then you talk about the night classes –

MR. MATTESON: And did they have a kind of response that was really sort of on top of that material?

MR. DE FOREST: To some degree some people did, but what I found out in the night classes – after a while it struck me that a lot of people were there simply because they weren't enormously intelligent and it kind of penalizes people in our society – in this particular society I think.

But the adjustment center was something else. I have a couple of really strange stories about that. I remember there was a guy called Palmer – an inmate called Palmer. I don't know what his first name was – it doesn't matter. And he and a Chicano guy who was kind of a decent enough guy – and Palmer – I said to Palmer one day, "You know, how long have you been in?" He said, "I'm 24." Then he says, "I've been in 12, 13 years." I say, "Isn't that quite a bit of time?" "Oh," he said, "I got – I was in junior high school and I ran with the wrong people. You know how it is. You get involved with the wrong people socially, and a friend of mine and I in junior high school started a – thought we'd hold up this grocery store and we did. We held up the grocery store. I don't know" – he said "we didn't use a gun because we carved something or – we got $25 bucks and I ran out in the street and we hadn't planned very well. We looked up and we saw this old '32 Buick with a key in it and we jumped in and started to drive away, but the old man that was across the street that owned the car ran out into the road." And Palmer says, "What could we do? We had to run over him." [Laughter.]

So I talked to him and finally one day this really jumpy, maniacal friend of his came in from Vacaville and they were jumping around. He said, "Mr. De Forest, don't bother us. This is my old friend from the medical facility in Vacaville. We haven't seen each other since we robbed the – what would it be? – the pharmacy and got strung out on the main ground there." He said, "You'll like this guy. He's really neat." So I started talking to his friend and he said, "You know, it's much better in Vacaville, Mr. De Forest. I like it here." He said, "They gave me a watercolor set and I was able to paint myself. And, you know, on one side I painted a beautiful jungle scene and on the other side," he said, "I painted a cathouse, and in the back room," he said, "I painted a TV set. I painted all the dials." But he said, "You know, the hell of it was you could only get two channels." [Laughter.]

MR. MATTESON: That's funny.

MR. DE FOREST: So that was – that had an influence on my teaching. You know, the other – I got very sensitive when I would first begin a class to censor myself and what I would say, and then after you were there a couple weeks you – you know, you forgot that and knew the people better, but all my teaching I was very – I tried not to overextend myself into any paranoia. What I mean by paranoia – sometimes it's just how you say things, the tone of voice you use, and if you overdid it

there you could get a response.

I had this old friend of mine, Al Lynch, that I have an old drawing. Alan was actually kind of an important guy and – around the Ferus. He'd been in the Ferus. And he organized art – so-called – they say that the art collecting movement got going in extension classes that Alan organized at UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] and a lot of the collectors that became well known attended these classes.

But Alan was a kind of – what would you – how would you call Alan? He's nervous and he tended to believe slightly in paranoia, the CIA, and I could tell it was there – his rising voice – and I kicked him in the leg. I said, "Al" – but then he calmed down a little bit and they – it's very funny with – he didn't like any overt kind of paranoia. And that helped – that was – I guess it was helpful in teaching.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, it's always interesting because – my experience in teaching is so different because with art history you turn off the lights and put up a slide and everybody's looking at the slide.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, don't know what's going on. Yeah.

MR. MATTESON: The tension is diverted – the depersonalization of the instructor. I try to do something along those lines.

MR. DE FOREST: Well, you know, you did deal with Seymour.

MR. MATTESON: I did. That's true.

MR. DE FOREST: And that had some of the same characteristics.

MR. MATTESON: That's true. That's absolutely true.

MR. DE FOREST: As I look back, you're about the only person I thought that did successfully do that.

MR. MATTESON: I learned a lot. You had San Quentin; I had Davis.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah.

MR. MATTESON: And the lessons I learned at Davis really profited me in Los Angeles.

MR. DE FOREST: I always wondered – we never talked about that. Seymour is certainly intelligent.

MR. MATTESON: Very.

MR. DE FOREST: Very bright, but could be difficult.

MR. MATTESON: Odd.

MR. DE FOREST: Odd, yes. Ever meet his daughter?

MR. MATTESON: I did when they were – when she was a child –

MR. DE FOREST: She grew up to be quite a strange girl.

MR. MATTESON: It was a very strange relationship.

MR. DE FOREST: Well, you have that painting there. Where did you get that?

MR. MATTESON: This is one from one of the catalogs –

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, okay.

MR. MATTESON: – with My Life and Times, but I don't know what it looks like in color.

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, you know, every color – and that's kind of Mondrianesque in some ways. It has a quality that – the tenor of this painting's – there's blue and there's pink and then orangish reds and dark greens.

MR. MATTESON: And when you say Mondrian, are you talking about his color scheme or early Mondrian, because the early Mondrians are –

MR. DE FOREST: Well, the fact that it's based on a grid and also his whole concept of each place on the canvas and color had an integral attraction to the eye and it sets up a kind of demand – dynamic relationship. That's what I mean by it.

MR. MATTESON: the interesting thing about – I'm sort of anticipating the discussion, but we might as well have it now – because when you put down in some of your – the people that talk to you – that Uccello is a very important painter for you.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: And the other one is Mondrian. These are artists who are interested in measurement.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: And kind of rationalization of sight in some sense.

MR. DE FOREST: Of vision, yeah.

MR. MATTESON: Of vision.

MR. DE FOREST: Hassel is very interested in that too. And certain aspects of – there was a kind of aspect of abstract expressionism that was into that, but it was quickly kind of submerged and maybe they moved on.

MR. MATTESON: Where does it appear in your pictures and how does it manifest if it does?

MR. DE FOREST: Well, I think it's – probably comes out of the drawing.

MR. MATTESON: In the drawings more than in the finished painting?

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, well I – over kind of a career I guess you could call it, I've done a lot of drawing and my drawing is intentionally from the first designed to be synthetic – manufactured. And I mean, when I was teaching next to Wayne Thiebaud he certainly – you know, that's a big point with drawing – our methods of approaching the issue. We were diametrically opposed in that sense.

Like, you know, Mondrian – if you locate the interior logic of a drawing, if you locate a spot in a certain area on the canvas of the drawing – that means something. Hassel used to say when you actually put a dot or any shape on a piece of paper or canvas, you've changed that piece of paper almost as much if you crumpled it up and stomped on it. So he had a – kind of a rationalistic approach to it behind the expressionism. And I suppose maybe that becomes of my kind of French Huguenot heritage or something, and certain aspects of Matisse and, you know, there's a rationalism about that.

MR. MATTESON: Mm-hmm. There is.

MR. DE FOREST: And that – and John Guttmann, who was very fond of Léger – and he used to talk a lot about that so I got interested in Léger's paintings and, you know. And those wonderful – I'd hunt at night all those people and their perspective lines going into the distance.

MR. MATTESON: Yes. Yes.

MR. DE FOREST: And –

MR. MATTESON: The Uccello, I think.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes. The Rout at San Romano [known as: Three Incidents from the Battle of San Romano, ca. 1438-1440] three stages.

MR. MATTESON: Yes.

MR. DE FOREST: The one in the National Gallery is just an incredible painting. That little rabbit placed in the certain place in the canvas and a whole shape of that horse. So I spent a lot of time with the interior logic of this and the drawing.

MR. MATTESON: Do you like Pisanello as well?

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah. Yeah. Not as much, but I can see the relevance there. Oh, a painter that's almost enormously interesting to me, as you might guess – if I can overcome my incipient Alzheimer's – oh, you know, he makes faces out of vegetables – the mannerist painter.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, Arcimboldo.

MR. DE FOREST: Arcimboldo, yes – a fascinating painter. I was looking at a book here – I was looking at it the other day –

MR. MATTESON: I saw –

MR. DE FOREST: I was trying some things in that area. Incredible painter.

MR. MATTESON: I saw an exhibition. I was in Rome – Florence last winter – October, November – and there was a show in Florence on Italian still life painting and there were several Arcimboldos there. Fabulous.

MR. DE FOREST: Just incredible. That sort of thing – that kind of painting is always interesting. That's right at the concerns I still have, you know, that – and also the thing that interests me was to try to do – there's a certain aspect of – Hassel talked about this – of surrealism. Once you don't make any difference between the solemnity of a subject, it could be very silly. You know, Moreau –

not to say his work was silly, you know, but it has a light quality about it. And that's actually really basically diametrically opposed to most of abstract expressionism; certainly still.

MR. MATTESON: You seem to have this reaction against abstract expressionism pretty early.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: So even when it was hot and –

MR. DE FOREST: Absolutely. Absolutely. And –

MR. MATTESON: In '55 when it's the king of the mountain, you're against it.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, and let me tell you that in those days to have another idea didn't make you all that popular.

MR. MATTESON: And at the same time, those from San Francisco, from the bay area, that reacted against AE were Park – and Diebenkorn. You didn't join them.

MR. DE FOREST: No, but I had over the years a speaking acquaintance with Diebenkorn – a very friendly man, and I used to speak – we had a speaking acquaintance. We'd always talk to each other. I didn't take a class. I didn't take a class at Park's. He was very important to that whole figurative – to that whole movement in ways that – I think he started with the heart of it more than most people might suspect in relation to color and more open-minded I think than the Clyfford Still wing. He would be the – [inaudible] – he introduced figuration into that, and he'd been an abstract painter.

MR. MATTESON: But what I mean to say is you didn't – in your reaction to abstract expressionism you didn't go figurative the way they did.

MR. DE FOREST: Not in the way they did, no, because – I don't know what I might have done, but during that time that was developing, I was in the army.

MR. MATTESON: That's right.

MR. DE FOREST: And then I came back and – this particular painting, let's see, I did when I was –

MR. MATTESON: This is My Life and Times.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, in Yakima and that's kind of the high point of my abstract expressionism – that and a couple other paintings. And then there are – you could find this one, absolutely. Now, you see this? The figuration is introduced –

MR. MATTESON: This is Painting for Pedagogues, 1961.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, and the shapes grow larger in the pattern. Now, some of these come out of scientific illustrations. I used to read the Scientific American. In the old days they had a lot of that stuff, and they're beautiful. And it's just – this is more Mondrianesque, but this you introduce kind of shapes and it becomes sort of shape invention.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, I can see in this, the pedagogy one, that there's kind of this microbe type –

MR. DE FOREST: Yes. Now, the drawing – the back room is, see, done shortly after that painting,

"My Life and Times in Yakima," and that bear –

MR. MATTESON: Pelt.

MR. DE FOREST: – Pelt becomes important. See, there the shapes become important. And those metamorphosize into figurative shapes.

MR. MATTESON: I see.

MR. DE FOREST: Animals and people and whatnot.

MR. MATTESON: Well, there's a kind of logic –

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, and then the animals are added.

MR. MATTESON: Exactly. I was going to ask, do the animals – does the figurative stuff sort of work into the constructions first, then into the paintings? Or are they just –

MR. DE FOREST: I'm trying – there's a very clear – there are historical sources. When I was working at the San Francisco Museum, I saw a van Doesburg – a little construction; they had to paint on the frame.

MR. MATTESON: I remember that.

MR. DE FOREST: And so I started painting on the frame and when I was in Yakima I worked so much, and working all the time, you didn't have much time to work, but there's a table saw in the back of the gallery and you'd saw pieces of wood and glue – you know, glued-up panel and paint them.

So it comes out – again it's related to the Mondrian, van Doesburg. Then there's other people that did that – the Uruguayan – what was his name? Juan Torres-García [actually Joaquín Torres-García].

MR. MATTESON: Torres-Garcia. Again, another good example in the San Francisco Museum of Torres.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, absolutely, and I saw those things. They're quite neat paintings. He's quite a potent painter.

MR. MATTESON: Relatively unknown.

MR. DE FOREST: Relatively unknown, but he makes things that are really effective – very simple things. And that's also what affected me by de Chirico. You could see real de Chirico's and I was amazed how simple they were, and that's a painter who I've gotten interested in, and also the painter John Guttmann was very interested in some parts of his work.

So the interest in moving those shapes – moving those things to shapes came about organically and it does come out of the study of surrealism and European painting I think more than abstract expressionism, but then of course I did that stuff as student exercises.

MR. MATTESON: I was – in John Fitz Gibbon's catalogue he does a very interesting – he brings in Miró's Poetic Object [1936].

MR. DE FOREST: Yes – beautiful.

MR. MATTESON: Beautiful thing with a parrot on top.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, beautiful. It's a chance meeting of a sewing machine and a shoe or something like that. Oh, a dissecting table? I've forgotten the quote.

MR. MATTESON: Comte de Lautréamont, which then becomes a picture by Man Ray.

MR. DE FOREST: And of course all that – what's that? Valery or who is the surrealist poet? éluard.

MR. MATTESON: éluard, yeah. But when I look at this, too – I'm looking at the Traveler Returns to the Shetland Islands, where you have a horse on top of this wood construction in a sort of multimedia thing below, I'm thinking that – is Rauschenberg part of this thing too?

MR. DE FOREST: Not so – a guy who was – you may never – a guy called Jim Kelly was a student at – never became very well known – at the Institute that I used to talk to a lot. He's an older guy. He had this interesting color sense. He used a lot of blues, pinks, and that affected me – moving away from the kind of earth colors that Still would use to kind of more artificial colors, and that's related to Mondrian of course – red, yellow, blue.

MR. MATTESON: Right. Now, when we're talking about constructions we're talking about the same time – and I'm using this as a total contrast to what you've been doing – to the works of Bruce Conner, George Herms, Kienholz, where there were these assemblages – these constructions.

MR. DE FOREST: That's true.

MR. MATTESON: But they're so different. I mean, there is grim – there's a sort of self-lacerating –

MR. DE FOREST: Well, they're, in all those cases, assemblages of found material and material worn and, you know, studies from life as it were. I knew Bruce Connor fairly well. Kienholz I knew through Walter. That's a weird guy. And they didn't use much color.

For whatever reason, the sculpture work that I've done has always been painted color to the extent that now I'm doing some park benches. I'll dig this out and show you because I've wasted six years of my life doing it. [Laughter.] It's something George Adams got me into because some collector of his was involved in the contemporary museum in Chicago – not the Art Institute, but the Contemporary – wanted some benches, so he said he would cast three.

Now, I didn't want to get involved in it, but finally I did it. I went out and ran down a caster – which the caster almost drove me nuts. I have another caster now. And so I got it going and then he decided they were too expensive. Well, I already had about 12 grand in the hole, so I kept going. And my wife says if I ever do that again –

[Audio break.]

MR. MATTESON: We left talking about constructions, and I left it asking you about all those fellows such as Connor and – oh, incidentally, this is disc two of the first session with Roy De Forest on April 7th, 2004.

We were talking about the constructions and how you didn't really follow, even though you did work with assemblage constructions like a lot of the artists in the Bay area were doing, such as Connor

and so on. You're right, theirs was almost monochromatic in their –

MR. DE FOREST: Well, they were assembling bits of life, you know, and sticking it on one surface. Mine was – tended to be more synthetic.

MR. MATTESON: But even so, even the mood is different. I mean, I saw the –

MR. DE FOREST: Higher key in color, and that comes about from my rejection of – you know, the religious aesthetic in Clyfford Still and also I, having met the student I was telling you about, Jim Kelly, I really got to like his blues and pinks and reds.

MR. MATTESON: I'll have to look it up because it sounds interesting.

MR. DE FOREST: An interesting painter that, you know, moved to New York. He married Sonia Gechtoff who had a run as an abstract painter.

MR. MATTESON: I remember her. She used to – I remember she –

MR. DE FOREST: He just passed away a couple years ago.

MR. MATTESON: He did?

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah. She's still living.

So the – my color's always kind of a little bit more French – you know, Matisse and German expressionism.

MR. MATTESON: Did you see that show when it was at the – the de Young, oh, about three years ago on the beat – the beat generation?

MR. DE FOREST: I must have been over there. I was in the catalogue and then this lady I knew, Mary Carr, made a couple tapes out of that, so I went. I think I saw it. Yes, I did see that show.

MR. MATTESON: My impression – I don't know if it's the same as your reaction, but I just thought it was pretty grim stuff.

MR. DE FOREST: It wasn't very colorful.

MR. MATTESON: It wasn't. It was totally gray and black.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, and that's in line with what we were just saying.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. DE FOREST: I would have more relationship to Southern California – you know, the abstract painting there. Oh, who would we see? Knud Merrild. No, they were some constructivist things that were brighter in color. And there was a movement in Southern California. Some painters that never really got to be really well known, but used brighter colors and patterns like Stuart Davis. Stuart Davis-like I'd say.

MR. MATTESON: There is a point where you start looking when the figurative does come back into your work in a very recognizable way and you're looking at American folk art.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, or Hudson River folk art, Hudson River abstract painting. Again maybe Stuart Davis.

MR. MATTESON: Did you find that – you know, one of the big elements – a current in a lot of American painting, especially the landscapes, has to do with journeys.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah.

MR. MATTESON: I mean, it's going through – it's the Hudson River or the Lewis and Clark Expedition –

MR. DE FOREST: Absolutely. Absolutely.

MR. MATTESON: And it's, you know, Bierstadt.

MR. DE FOREST: Bierstadt.

MR. MATTESON: It's this element of traveling through landscape that just seems to be part of your work.

MR. DE FOREST: Blakelock – I wrote a term paper on him once.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, really?

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, interesting, odd nut the way he turned – actually incarcerated for a considerable period.

MR. MATTESON: Like all good people every now and then. [Laughs.]

MR. DE FOREST: Well, I think he was chronically – he had lost it.

MR. MATTESON: Lost it – Now, when you were hired in 1965 at Davis, which is incidentally the same year I was hired as a part-time lecturer –

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, I didn't know that.

MR. MATTESON: That same year – we were there the same semester. Our debut was the same semester I'm pretty sure: September of 1965. You had been teaching a lot beforehand and all of a sudden you're here in a university climate. There are graduate students, or maybe there wasn't at that time.

MR. DE FOREST: It started pretty low key. There were graduate students, but it was a small program, and then –

MR. MATTESON: Did your teaching change very much when you encountered that?

MR. DE FOREST: Over the years I think it did, but I – all the themes that I had – all the methods I had learned I kind of relied on. Basically I – these children's classes I taught, or taught in, probably had as much to do with teaching technique as anything, strangely enough.

MR. MATTESON: You mean in Yakima?

MR. DE FOREST: No, I taught some down here. I taught at the San Francisco Museum. I assisted a

guy teaching classes. And in a way that sort of set the modus operandi for teaching. Drawing I used to use little scenarios. We'd set up some scenarios – some ideas Hassel had and, you know, imaging. And then I taught arts and crafts one year. I taught one class at night and I set up sometimes a scenario like do a composition of trees, two different creatures, and a dwelling; and every tree has to be different in size, height, breadth, color, and your two living creatures have to be dramatically different, and the house has to be not a house you would see on the street.

Well, I don't know if that – I had a series of little stories concocted to force someone to create a problem, and one of the students there – you know, just an amateur painter – he got so that every night I came I'd have to give him a new problem. And he painted those. In spite of them some of them came out really pretty nice, so I had to – before I could go to work I had to think – [laughter] – you know, a military script.

And strange enough, that experience got me into the lectures in drawing, although, you know, I'd set up some still lives, but a lot of them were based on what would you do if.

MR. MATTESON: I see.

MR. DE FOREST: Or if you could only use two colors, but – and so on – this whole series. Many, many I constructed that I've completely forgotten about. And I started that at Yakima J.C. and in some ways my teaching there was maybe more elaborate. I think because I had a whole room full of junk I could use and the building at Davis constrained me quite a bit.

MR. MATTESON: That's before we had the big art building?

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, well, I liked the old buildings more than the new ones. As you know, those new buildings were really cheaply made.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, and cold.

MR. DE FOREST: Cold. They never did work too well, but, you know, I generated this way of going about it out of all these other experiences.

MR. MATTESON: And when you – we were talking before we started – you were hired like I was, by Richard Nelson, who was the chairman of the art department. He had – as everyone who had looked at this particular period – he'd assembled a rather fabulous group of artists to teach. At least one couldn't think that this fellow could have done it because he's such an unassuming sort, but here he had Wayne Thiebaud.

MR. DE FOREST: He was a very shrewd judgment of character and very, very canny.

MR. MATTESON: Wayne was already there when you were there. And Wiley was there –

MR. DE FOREST: Bob was there.

MR. MATTESON: Bob Arneson was there. Was Manuel there?

MR. DE FOREST: And Ralph Johnson. Manny was hired the same time you and I were – exactly the same year.

MR. MATTESON: Okay, and then Ralph Johnson was there and Roland Peterson.

MR. DE FOREST: Roland was there and I met him at a party. Catherine Brown, who runs a print operation, wanted to get a job teaching printmaking and I went with her and met Nelson. I had a couple slides and he asked me what I did and I showed him the slides. Oh, he says, I know your work. He said – asked me about what I was trying to do and we talked for a long time – [END TAPE 1, SIDE A] – that I was trying to do and we talked for a long time.

Well, he said, "Next time that there's an opening here, I'll let you know." He said, "I like your attitude. I think you might be able to contribute to this department. I'll give you a call if any opening occurs." Sure enough – my friend Tony De Lap was teaching there the year before.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, I didn't know Tony was there.

MR. DE FOREST: And then he moved to Irvine and Nelson called me and he says, "Why don't you send in an application here?" He said, "Tony's left and he's a friend of yours. I like what you said and I think you've got a chance of working here," and so sure enough he – what Nelson did – he made up his own mind and then he convinced other people. They thought it was their idea, but essentially Nelson made every major choice and he talked to people – a very clever man – very clever.

And he liked people. The great thing about Nelson is he didn't like people that thought the same.

MR. MATTESON: That's interesting.

MR. DE FOREST: He liked everyone arguing all the time. And that was the basis of the department really – a difference of viewpoint. And then when Conrad Atkinson was hired, this awful English fascist they brought in, his idea was everyone should have the same political viewpoint and if you had a good viewpoint then that would result in a good department, but that was – I didn't know that your politics necessarily had anything to do with art. Still, for instance, was – most people don't know this, but he was a terrible conservative – really, you know, to the right of Goldwater.

MR. MATTESON: Is that so?

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, yeah.

MR. MATTESON: How did he live in San Francisco?

MR. DE FOREST: Well, I learned this from Hassel in a way and other people, Susan Landauer confirmed that too. And Hassel – that was hard on Hassel because he'd worked in the Farm Administration. He was – actually Hassel I'm sure for many years was a card-carrying Communist and, you know, the labor school, and Hassel was really into left-wing politics and a real Socialist liberal. As it was at that time, you know.

MR. MATTESON: Sure.

MR. DE FOREST: And so I think that was a sore point in getting along with Still, but they – somehow they thought that Still's commitment to painting was unusual enough. Now that I look back on it, it looks kind of like certain parts of Miró you could covert to a Still painting – certain paintings of Miró with ragged edges and there's a certain sense in which he'll just move shapes around like Mondrian.

– All I know is that Henry got – there's a whole, as you well know, gallery at the San Francisco Museum devoted in perpetuity to Still.

MR. MATTESON: Henry Hopkins?

MR. DE FOREST: Involved and that's –

MR. MATTESON: Right, that's right. The big gift by Still's –

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, but they have to maintain it forever.

MR. MATTESON: Like the Hans Hofmann gallery at the Berkeley Museum.

MR. DE FOREST: At Berkeley. And maybe – I think the Hofmann may be a better selection. And you consider, you know, Still was an interesting painter at the time, but that really – times change, ideas change, and space changes, so I don't know – you know, in 20 years even whether that's going to seem as significant as it might have been.

MR. MATTESON: Well, when you get to Davis – these are artists who primarily are working in some figurative tradition. I mean, except for – I don't know if Ralph Johnson was.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, he did, and then he got into sculpture. Yeah.

MR. MATTESON: That's right. That's right. Did that affect you in any way? Did it reinforce things? Did it –

MR. DE FOREST: Well, there's some – you know, I knew – got to know Bill really well and my big –

MR. MATTESON: Bill Wiley?

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, my best friend probably over the years in the department is Bob Arneson, a really interesting guy – crazy.

MR. MATTESON: Yes.

MR. DE FOREST: And very funny.

MR. MATTESON: And very funny.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, and Bob had a big influence on me. We used to talk a lot about art, you know, and he was very pro – very ambitious. We traveled to New York. I had some great times with him in New York, just really funny times. And I knew Wayne over the years and Wayne was actually very pleasant to me, but Wayne's more remote. You know, I didn't know him socially that well.

MR. MATTESON: I think that's pretty much everyone's –

MR. DE FOREST: But Bob used to be here and I saw him a couple of days before he died actually.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, is that so?

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, yeah. I – probably my best friend in the department. I knew Ralph quite well. And Roland I liked – a very decent man, but Bob was, art-wise, maybe the biggest influence. And Wiley was there kind of briefly – two or three years – and then he left. But I think my – emotionally my attitude was geared more to Bob. He had a great sense of humor –or became humorous. He could be very funny – very funny.

MR. MATTESON: I remember one – I once went to the Alice Street house –

MR. DE FOREST: Yes. Yes.

MR. MATTESON: – for a wine jug party or something. I think when I first came to – it must have been '60s – late '60s or something, I was still teaching there and it was just – I mean, here I came from, you know, a rather starchy art history background and that was totally – I just couldn't sort of – didn't understand it.

MR. DE FOREST: We had a great graduate student who I see – correspond with, Victor Cicansky, that was – you probably wouldn't know him. He was a Canadian. He's from Romanian background and Victor was over at Bob's place and Bob was making tile for his entire house – hand-made tile, but he was cleaning off the asphalt tile and Victor said, "Bob," he says, "it smells like gasoline." Bob says, "I am using this – it's great to take off this tile." And Victor says, "Bob, you know, there's other stuff that'll do this; don't you think it's a little dangerous?" Bob says, "Oh, no. I've been doing it for two days." So Victor said he got just about back to his car and the sidewalk and the windows – boom! – blew out and he had a fire in the kitchen and Bob had to redo it. That's typical of Bob – a Bob story.

MR. MATTESON: Okay, well, I notice – I wanted to ask you about this all along. Right about 1971 you do this picture called Steamship to the Interior.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah. Sandy Arneson – or –

MR. MATTESON: Shannonhouse.

MR. DE FOREST: Shannonhouse, yes. Yeah, Shannonhouse.

MR. MATTESON: She bought that?

MR. DE FOREST: No, I traded with Bob, so that's – she owns that.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, what is interesting about it is that of course there is this smokestack in which he –

MR. DE FOREST: He actually did this brick man.

MR. MATTESON: That's right, the Kiln Man. [1971]

MR. DE FOREST: Kiln Man. And I don't know if it has any direct relation to them, but I suppose it could be.

MR. MATTESON: So you don't know which came first?

MR. DE FOREST: I don't know. I don't remember being – you know, I always liked Bob's work, but I – could have been. All that time I don't know where I derived that.

MR. MATTESON: The students at – I mean, the atmosphere at Davis, now that you had graduate students – you moved here to Port Costa in '65.

MR. DE FOREST: Most all the time I was at – except for one year – in fact, I drove from Richmond and I drove through here.

MR. MATTESON: And you – so there was a – it was a commuting thing just as most – a lot of people had.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, most of the people commuted there. Bob lived there most of the time.

MR. MATTESON: And Wayne came in from Sacramento.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, Sacramento, but it was about an hour. It wasn't bad.

MR. MATTESON: Did you – I mean, did you get involved with the kind of camaraderie? I mean, you've said that pretty much with Bob Arneson and so on, but did you get involved with the graduate students?

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, yeah. Yeah. There was a period at Davis for quite a number of years – I always think my teaching experience was like a sandwich: kind of crusty on the side. So I first started at Yakima J.C. it was tough, and the last couple years I was working at Davis it was sort of crusty being with Conrad Atkinson. But there was a period in between that teaching at Davis is a lot of fun. Earlier days you didn't have such huge classes and you'd get a lot of strange people that would wander in. The days when Davis was really out in the bushes and the only people that Southern California would send their kids to Davis would be to get them away from the streets.

MR. MATTESON: Get them away from Berkeley and the riots.

MR. DE FOREST: Riots. And so you'd see a lot of people – a lot of them, you know, take their girls from Los Angeles. Some good students came that way.

MR. MATTESON: I was really impressed by it when I was there that the graduate students when I finally became a full-time assistant professor in the early '70s I met a lot of interesting people.

MR. DE FOREST: And a certain period it was a wonderful place to teach, and then the classes –

MR. MATTESON: Lucian Pompili –

MR. DE FOREST: Lucian, yes. He came because – it's a very strange story. Hardly ever does anyone look at recommendations, and someone had been reading those – maybe it was Bob, and he says, these are really horrendous, so we all read them and then we decided – I think it was Rob said, "If he's that bad, we ought to have him." [Laughter.]

MR. MATTESON: And he turned out to be pretty good.

MR. DE FOREST: Well, he turned out to be pretty good, but he's – he could also get people worked up and – you know, so – which is fine. He was an interesting student. He's doing some – I think he lives as a contractor in New York now.

MR. MATTESON: Well, the last I heard of it was he was – he was living with his wife, who teaches at Cranbrook.

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, okay.

MR. MATTESON: And they had a sort of bicoastal relationship. He was teaching at Pratt.

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, okay. Well, you know more about it than I do then probably. Occasionally an old grad student will come by. Did you know Hanno Ahrens? He was a graduate student –

[inaudible] – he had something to say about it.

And some very interesting students came through in the middle period.

MR. MATTESON: Deborah Butterfield?

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, John Buck. We see them regularly. We travel with them.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, is that so?

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, yeah. Yeah, they're – Gloria speaks to her on the phone about two or three times a month.

MR. MATTESON: I'm sure she doesn't remember me. I saw – we'll get to that a little bit later, but so getting up to the late to middle early '70s and so on, Humphrey must have approached you to do a retrospective.

MR. DE FOREST: No. You know, I know how that happened.

MR. MATTESON: How did that happen?

MR. DE FOREST: I have the inside track. There were a gay couple who collected my work: Mason Wells and Frank Hamilton. Frank Hamilton – they were on the board of San Francisco Museum and Mason was older than Frank and then he passed away and Frank stayed on the board and he led a revolt saying that Grace L. McCann wouldn't show anybody – you'd have to be east of New York, preferably French, Spanish, or Latin American. And so they presented then current director with an ultimatum that they had to show somebody locally to start some local shows, and I'm trying to remember who the director was then – Gerald Nordland maybe.

MR. MATTESON: That's it.

MR. DE FOREST: And so they tried to figure out how to select it and one of them said, "Well, let's list all our collection – personal collection and see if that would help up." And I happened to be one – for god knows what reason, everyone had something, so then they said "Well, we'll – we don't – we'll give him a show".

MR. MATTESON: Satisfy everybody at one time. [Laughter.]

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, and I was – I think I was scheduled to work with Sue Foley and I said, "Well, you know, Sue, I like you perfectly well, but I would like to work with John because I've known him so many years," and so I worked with him – John Humphrey.

MR. MATTESON: And that was a traveling show. That wasn't your first exposure to New York, but it did go to Ft. Worth and then it ended up at the Whitney.

[Cross talk.]

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, I went to the Whitney. I went there and, let's see, Barbara [Barbara Haskell] what's her name? – she's still at the Whitney, or was. Maybe she's retired – very small lady. And I had an opening there and I really enjoyed that. Lloyd Goodrich was there and John Bauer and they approached and I talked to both of them – just thoroughly kind of elegant gentlemen. And that's the way – at the time when they ere on their way out that I think someone racier was coming in.

Great scholars.

MR. MATTESON: Yes, they were the ones that brought American painting to the –

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, couldn't have been more elegant. I really was impressed by them.

MR. MATTESON: Did – you got a good review. Hilton Kramer gave you a good review though.

MR. DE FOREST: Well, I guess. I met him later at Skowhegan.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, you did?

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah.

MR. MATTESON: Well, just as an aside, it was because of him I got my first job – I took in '65.

[Cross talk.]

MR. DE FOREST: No kidding?

MR. MATTESON: What happened was they had contracted him to come out to teach.

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, Hilton to come out for a quarter?

MR. MATTESON: And he at the last minute –

MR. DE FOREST: Cancelled out.

MR. MATTESON: – cancelled out and they had to get someone quick and they got me and it was by chance that they got me.

MR. DE FOREST: Well, as I remember that year, you're the one person I talked to consistently other than Price Amerson, who was in there and then Seymour I guess ran him off to the restoration or the little gallery thing and who I also talked to, and then there was another guy – Craig something or other.

MR. MATTESON: Yes. It was a short time.

MR. DE FOREST: But he didn't last long. Yeah, Seymour ran him off very short time. And there was Mary Fong, but she wasn't too interesting to talk to. I have no idea about her competence or anything; she just was a little hard to deal with and, you know, what's that strange lady? Susan McKillop. She's a decent enough person. I don't know what she was as an art historian.

MR. MATTESON: She's pretty good, but she didn't last.

MR. DE FOREST: They didn't last. Seymour didn't like her or, you know, they complained about her. So I remember you were the last person there that I could talk to I would see, you know, from art history just in passing.

MR. MATTESON: You know, it's interesting, I remember you asking me one time about George Stubbs.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, yes, one of my favorite painters.

MR. MATTESON: And I was shocked that you knew, but of course you know it makes perfect sense that you did know George Stubbs and his drawings of horses, and you know, animals.

MR. DE FOREST: Well, Wayne and I had this little game we'd play for maybe 20 years. When the reviews got really boring, he'd turn to me and he'd say, "Roy, do you know who Landis Lutwin [ph] was?" I'd say, "Yes I do, Wayne," and I described his painting which is kind of a very quirky painter. And in 20 years maybe we only stumped each other twice at the very most because Wayne had a – actually he had a really good knowledge of art history.

MR. MATTESON: Yes, I know that.

MR. DE FOREST: A knowledge of ideas if you – that I was talking about. What's that about Karl Popper – The Open Society and Its Enemies [1945]? The only person that read – you know, a very literate guy – very conservative.

MR. MATTESON: But you know the – I remember these faculty meetings because I, again – when I got there in 1972 I guess and I went to my first faculty meeting – coming from Berkeley, again, we have no contact with artists, and the general consensus – the unverbalized thing was that artists were just a pain and you just had to deal with them.

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, in the art history department?

MR. MATTESON: In the art history department. There was no contact, and so I – when I went to Davis and went to my first faculty meeting, I came away thinking, those are the smart ones. We the art historians are just somehow – I've got the wrong – and I remember one of the reasons for it was because – again, you had been there a while and I was the new kid on the block – you asked me, ever heard of – and you gave me this name I'd never heard of, and he was apparently some illustrator for Saturday Evening Post or Collier's Magazine –

MR. DE FOREST: George Montgomery Flagg [actually James Montgomery Flagg] or some –

MR. MATTESON: Something like that. [Laughter.] Who am I dealing with?

MR. DE FOREST: Well, that's – I guess that's from the game Wayne and I played. Wayne had been – worked for Disney and he knew all those people – you know, comic illustrators. And we had – the greatest compliment that Wayne ever gave me was he was about 70 then and he was still teaching and I said, "Well, Wayne, good god, if I were – you know, could be able to retire, I would. I'd go to the studio full time." And he said – I said, "You're still teaching."

Oh, he said, "You know, I really enjoy teaching and I teach this course, theory and criticism," and he said "If I didn't teach this, I'm sure the graduates – there's nobody here that could get it and I provide that service." And he – I was standing there for about five minutes and he finally turned to me and he said, "Do you know, Roy, you could actually teach that course." [Laughter.] And I thought, good god, this is the ultimate compliment that I'll ever get from this man.

MR. MATTESON: That's funny. So what was the reaction to your going into this big retrospective, national exposure, major media attention?

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, I don't think it had any major effect on my life. Like I already, I think, formed a relationship with Allan Frumkin and I decided there were very few places that would show me in New York and he was one and he was as good as any.

MR. MATTESON: And he had that niche of market. Who would be –

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, he had that niche.

MR. MATTESON: He would be interested in your stuff.

MR. DE FOREST: And there were other people – someone that we hadn't mentioned that was very important to me and really also figures in this idea, the kind of rejection of Still, and you get lighter – Joan Brown, who is a hell of an artist and a really neat person – wonderful person.

MR. MATTESON: I didn't know her, but I saw her at a lot of openings in the area.

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, over the years I got to know her really well. We were getting drunk one time. She and Gloria – her husband and Gloria were there and Joan and I were really getting drunk, talking.

MR. MATTESON: And she was married to Manuel, wasn't she?

MR. DE FOREST: She was married to Manuel briefly – to half of Northern California, I think.

MR. MATTESON: [Laughs.]

MR. DE FOREST: And she's a person who had some influence on me, but she had a – I felt more akin to what she was doing and I think she –

MR. MATTESON: Was she as informed, do you think, about art history as you are?

MR. DE FOREST: Maybe not, but she wasn't – certainly wasn't illiterate. I don't think she was as interested as I was, but she certainly knew what she was about.

MR. MATTESON: There seems to be – I mean, some of the things that I've noticed that a lot of the West Coast artists I've known, which were mainly the Davis people and some people that I knew – came to know in Southern California when I moved there, was that unlike a lot of the East Coast artists, there seems to be a disinterest, or if there is an interest it's very secretive, about the history of art. And you're one of the few exceptions. You and Wayne are.

MR. DE FOREST: Actually Bob.

MR. MATTESON: Bob Arneson, really?

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, he was pretty literate, you know.

MR. MATTESON: That's pretty – that's interesting to know.

MR. DE FOREST: You know, you never –

MR. MATTESON: I never asked him a certain question.

MR. DE FOREST: you might never know that, but particularly sculpture, but he was pretty literate and he'd read books about that. I don't know. He read more art history, frankly, than he did literature and so forth at large, but he knew what – and he was a great looker. You know, he'd go to a museum and he'd spend two weeks – a great looker. And Bob was pretty literate.

MR. MATTESON: Well, the thing – then it's sort of the mirror of not really having it that's interesting.

MR. DE FOREST: Well, I know a lot of people that taught at Berkeley in the art department – Wayne was, I would say, you know, he kind of taught art history.

MR. MATTESON: Yes, I know.

MR. DE FOREST: I mean, for his knowledge, he –

MR. MATTESON: And he brought to it a kind of –

MR. DE FOREST: Actually a kind of academic, historical background.

MR. MATTESON: But with a sensitivity of the working artist, I think.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, but I think if I'd taught theory and criticism it would have been slightly different.

MR. MATTESON: Would you have – I would imagine you would have put Miro right at the top of the list.

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, yes. Yes, but – I mean, you know, it's – and then there's always a lot of painters you need to know about that you may not particularly like. There's hundreds of those. Hassel Smith used to say, some you send to the Elysian Fields and others to hell. [Laughter.]

MR. MATTESON: Well, I think the next time we talk and can get together, we'll talk more about your later pictures and your – stuff you read and I'd like to talk a lot about –

MR. DE FOREST: Well, I used to – now I read a lot of nonfiction, but I read novels. I read detective stories. My wife says I never read fiction, but you know, I've read – in the past there is a time I read a lot of – I like Victorian novels.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, you do?

MR. DE FOREST: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: Anything special?

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, what's that – is it Henry Esmond [1852]? Dickens.

MR. MATTESON: Dickens. George Elliot?

MR. DE FOREST: George Meredith. I've read some of Elliot and that's not –

MR. MATTESON: You ever read Trollope?

MR. DE FOREST: I – slightly, yeah. Wilkie Collins. And Moby Dick [1851] – an incredible book.

MR. MATTESON: Incredible book.

MR. DE FOREST: I think that's the foremost maybe American artist. You know, Mark Twain. Because Mark Twain that's actually kind of related to what I do.

MR. MATTESON: In what way?

MR. DE FOREST: Well, the guy – you know, Huckleberry Finn; he's taking a trip.

MR. MATTESON: Right.

MR. DE FOREST: And Twain I was reading – I was listening – we listened, Gloria and I, to the books part of TV – you know, it's enormously interesting. They interview different authors and it can be really interesting.

MR. MATTESON: On C-SPAN.

MR. DE FOREST: C-SPAN, yeah. And over period of time. I was listening to a scholar – Mark Twain – I learned something, but the idea of taking a trip down the river. I did a construction one time called Drifting Down the Mississippi [?]and they're all that Americana. I just really feel – really a hell of a novel.

And this critic said it's weak at the end because he was a great novelist but imperfect because at certain points he had planning difficulties as to the whole gestalt of the thing. He was better at –

MR. MATTESON: Episodes.

MR. DE FOREST: Episodes and analyzing people than he was at planning things. And – oh, what's the book? The Charterhouse of Parma [1839] I thought was –

MR. MATTESON: Stendhal.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, a great book. And I'm also interested in Roman history. That's because I took four years of Latin.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, really? Four years.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah. Well, I got started – they don't teach Latin anymore – and so I stuck in there. I got my A-minus or B-plus for every damn quarter. I finally cut out of it. I could see that it – I should have taken Spanish. I have this friend that taught Hispanic literature and if I'd taken that and been able to just kind of go into his class and –

MR. MATTESON: It would have been interesting if you had because Don Quixote [1605] is, of course, this – traveling across the Spanish landscape –

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, yes. Absolutely.

MR. MATTESON: – and with all the mishaps and so on.

MR. DE FOREST: I love travel books. You ever read Redmond O'Hanlon?

MR. MATTESON: Don't know him. [Laughter.]

MR. DE FOREST: He used to be editor of – oh, a literary paper in England. He wrote a marvelous book about trying to find dinosaurs in the Congo that's just incredible. And he did that in South America, but the one about the Congo was a frightening book. I can –

MR. MATTESON: And it's nonfiction?

MR. DE FOREST: It's a travel book.

MR. MATTESON: It's a travel book.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, so I read a lot of travel books.

MR. MATTESON: Well, why don't we stop here and next time we'll talk about that.

[Audio break.]

MR. MATTESON: This is Lynn Matteson speaking with Roy De Forest in Port Cost on May 26th, 2004.

Roy, the last time we were talking, we talked about some of your reading and the importance of literary sources for some of your work. I want to return to that, but right now I'd like to talk a little about some of the techniques you've used in your art and how they've changed and in what way they – how you think about them.

In dealing with paintings, the obviously preferred medium is oil on canvas, but it's not always just regular oil, is it? There are mixtures of different types of oils and was that always the – did you use latex or –

MR. DE FOREST: No, I came to using water paint – different kinds, mixtures, of water paint in a – more or less for political reasons. It got so that I decided to turn away from abstract expressionism and that was a deliberate move, and I thought one of the ways to do that would be to no longer use oil paint. Like Clyfford Still had his own paint mill and he ground up batches of cheap paint, which is scraped over the canvas. And I started using that – not his paint, but I started using cheap oil paint and then it got so – there's two different reasons. There's a reason people use oil paint. It dries slowly and you can kind of blend away, and that's its advantage in painting what you would call realistic representation. You can blend for a couple days.

But I like paint to dry fast on the site, so you had to often cancel. And I started reading very early – when I was living in Yakima, Washington, I found a technical manual by one of the great German artists on the technology of pigments and so forth – Max Weber – when I went to high school, and I have that somewhat sort of mind, so I got around here practically everything that was ever published in that area, and I taught materials for years and really enjoyed the cooking process of painting. It is like cooking. And I deliberately thought that if I used a water-based paint – I went in for something that looked – just that I rejected the San Francisco branch of abstract expressionism. I would get something that looked different. And it did work that way. The color works a different way and it dries fast so that you don't have the ability to blend like you do with oil. You can kind of fudge with that, but it isn't really too successful.

And it's a totally different paint. Water, you know – tempera – the classic egg and oil paint – it was different. The van Eycks had a different technique than, say, Rubens although its, well, both oil, and there's disadvantages to using water-thinnable paint in many ways. It's not as rich as oil. The one thing it has is it had kind of more intense colors – the reds and the blues and the greens have a kind of a higher chroma I guess you would say. It just – it's just more intense.

The other thing it will do that oil paint won't do is it will stack up. You can make big, thick, pigmented areas much sounder technically. When you start to stack up oil to approaching an inch thickness – linseed oil is not a great adhesive. You know, it does some things, but on the other hand polyvinyl acetate and acrylic – you can practically make airplanes and boats out of them. It's a wonderful

adhesive, so you can stick all kinds of junk in there: gravel, fillers of various kinds, and create all kinds of textures. And for – again, Clyfford Still, he had a lot of kind of texture in his painting and I thought that if I – all of my paintings are kind of – take off on his textural painting, but a sense of irony – I use it differently.

MR. MATTESON: His – a lot of his pictures are beginning to flake off. It's a big problem.

MR. DE FOREST: Well, that's because he ground his own paint and probably used cheap oil, cheap pigment. Rothko was noticeably – notoriously a bad technician and the same – and he used too much turpentine. And the same thing – Rothko's. I went to a restorer's conference where I met some interesting people, among whom was June Leaf, who I got along with very well and liked a lot.

MR. MATTESON: Who was that?

MR. DE FOREST: June Leaf.

MR. MATTESON: L-E-A-F?

MR. DE FOREST: L-E-A-F. She's a Chicago painter and she was out to Davis for a quarter, and she was married to that kind of great European photographer [Robert Frank]. Who am I thinking of now? They lived in Nova Scotia

MR. MATTESON: Robert Frank?

MR. DE FOREST: Robert Frank. You got it.

MR. MATTESON: I remember when she was visiting.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, but a very lively person, you know, and probably when she was younger very beautiful.

MR. MATTESON: Yes, quite statuesque.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, but really witty and fun to talk to. And then I – the same conference – Luis Jimenez, who I see on and off now. But to return to the subject, I got really interested in what you could do with water paint, and in many ways it's not as rich as oil, but it does lend itself to all kinds of invention of what you can glue with it and so forth. And the last few years I'm thinking – I've been thinking a lot about moving away from standard ways to use paint into something more abstract and not in the style of painting. By the word abstract I mean something removed from the impressionist way of using paint, which sort of really modified the previous system of using paint – has lasted for years in a lot of bad academic painting.

A thought occurred to me that I ought to try to remove myself from that Monet way of putting paint on – you know, which he of course used with great beauty and finesse and god knows what, but when it gets down to the base form of a lot of academic painting is not a very inventive way to do it, so I've tried to move away from that. Whether or not I've been very successful or not – a whole other issue, but I've known a lot of people that had some very strange techniques.

My friend Frank Owen, who was a graduate student at Davis – he managed to cast acrylic. He would make a mold and cast the acrylic in it. And then there's a famous – well, I don't know how famous he was, but a New York – Robert – I think he's Edgar Buonagurio, and he loaded up a surface maybe an inch thick with acrylic in different layers and he took a grinder and ground his

image into the paint. So I've always been interested in the aspect of kind of paint engineering that I've –

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, paint construction.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, I've been interested to this day and try to add to that. Now I'm thinking of using some rag paper pasted to the canvas and then modified with filler, very much like they modify fiberglass boats by putting Teflon fiber in it, and you can build up these really quite strong – it's two-faced material. You can build up kind of mountain peaks and so forth.

MR. MATTESON: Oh wow.

MR. DE FOREST: So it's – the way you can do with paints or how you can invent things – that aspect of invention in paint is the major factor in what you would call my style of painting. That's one of the things that always motivates me. Rather than, say, taking an image and then finding a way to express it in paint, sometimes I think about how to use a paint and then find an image that fits it.

MR. MATTESON: Your paintings all – nearly all the time have a quite tactile quality about them.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes. Yes.

MR. MATTESON: So then that element has always been there.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, that comes from very early on – the dots. I had a friend, Bill Bowman, who graduated from Stanford and I saw some early paintings of his, which he pushed the paint to the canvas and then knifed it away and I thought, well, that's a clever thing to do so I – for years I've used this – all these dots, which are –

MR. MATTESON: Is that Richard Bowman or Bill Bowman?

MR. DE FOREST: Bill Bowman. I know who Richard Bowman was.

MR. MATTESON: Okay, because he was also at Stanford.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, and he also used fluorescent paint.

MR. MATTESON: That's right – really wild fluorescent paint.

MR. DE FOREST: And unfortunately – in fact once – I used to work in the San Francisco Museum, as I've alluded to, and –

MR. MATTESON: As an installer.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, for years. One time I stopped – one weekend I was working there and I was taking these file cases to the basement. So I often went to look at them and there's Richard Bowman's file, so I pulled it out, but it's not actually particularly interesting. I thought I would find out something. And there was a letter the museum had written to a paint technologist as to the – all the durability of the luminescent paint he was using and the thesis was it was very fugitive. So that – for that reason they did not purchase one of his paintings.

MR. MATTESON: And I don't see many around, to tell you the truth. [Laughs.]

MR. DE FOREST: Peter Saul – my friend Peter Saul, however, did use the paint and I talked to him about that. I say, Peter, don't you know that these are going to fade? Oh yeah, Roy, yes I do, but it looks so great and flashy I add some ordinary paint to it half and half so there'll be something left. And that's typical Peter. And I don't think he uses it much anymore in recent years, so it may have gotten a little faded. And that wonderful "Serving Together in the Vietnam War" [actual name: Vietnam, 1966], which I really loved, I think he used some.

MR. MATTESON: Did – now when you talk about your drawings, you had none of this tactile painting at all.

MR. DE FOREST: Oh yes, quite a bit. I can show you some stuff downstairs. It's verged over into the drawings.

MR. MATTESON: So it has come from the painting to the drawing?

MR. DE FOREST: Yes. And it's interesting: I had this big argument with my son, Pascal, who is also a painter. He uses paint really flat, so I'm trying to get him going on painting and I keep telling him, Pascal, maybe I'll – the thickness of paint adds variety to it. And he says, well, Dad, no. I want to keep it all flat because art magazines have flat pages – was his logic.

But I've always – that aspect of painting – the technology – has always interested me. I was trying to think of this old TA I had from Davis. Chris – [Chris Peterson]

MR. MATTESON: Brown?

MR. DE FOREST: Not Chris Brown – a woman. The last name will come to me, but she was my assistant when we taught this materials class and she later told me – she said, "I learned so much from you about technology" that when I – the next quarter I TA'ed for Wayne Thiebaud and she said he didn't know anywhere near and I was able to teach the whole class. Wayne went out because I knew things he didn't even know. [END TAPE 2, SIDE A] – but occasionally I'll just pick them up and read them. You know, you'll read about restoration. I have about five books on restoration and they're just fun to read.

MR. MATTESON: Well, did you know when – at one point at Davis there was a restoration –

[Cross talk.]

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, there was. I knew all those people.

MR. MATTESON: – with Gerald Hoepfner.

MR. DE FOREST: Jerry – I knew Jerry. Jerry was visiting here not long ago. And there was when – I think when I almost first came to Davis – I don't know if he was still there when you were there, but there was another restorer – an old traditional restorer there and somewhere he'd picked up Washington Crossing the Delaware [1851].

MR. MATTESON: That's right.

MR. DE FOREST: But another painting that was – had been in the boiler room.

MR. MATTESON: That's right.

MR. DE FOREST: And the students are restoring that. That's right.

MR. MATTESON: It's now in the main library at Berkeley.

MR. DE FOREST: So I think I introduced Jerry to Davis. He'd been a student of mine at Arts and Crafts.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, I didn't know that.

MR. DE FOREST: And he went back to Oberlin and got into restoration and then he got a degree. He came back and was at Davis a while, but for some reason – the guy I'm trying to think of is a New York collector – no, the Los Angeles collector that Fred – first name was Fred. Henry Hopkins worked for him as an assistant after he left San Francisco Museum. He and his wife had been big collectors. He owned half the Toyota agencies in the U.S.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, Fred Weisman.

MR. DE FOREST: Fred Weisman. You got it. And it was very interesting because they had about four or five restorers there. I asked them, you know, about my stuff. Oh, they didn't even want to talk about it. He said, "Your stuff is probably as durable as any made now, you know." But they spent their entire time talking about the difficulties they had restoring Ad Reinhardt, practically all the painters – the color field school –

MR. MATTESON: Yes, Morris Louis is a very–

MR. DE FOREST: You know, because he soaked the canvas and in essence they said it can't be restored, so it was enormously interesting.

MR. MATTESON: I think Sam Francis –

MR. DE FOREST: It could be. Sam actually I knew pretty well.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, in the local Bay Area.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, yes. He owned a couple of works of mine strangely enough. A pretty interesting guy actually. And then I met one of his ex-wives, Muriel Francis, which was a strange lady. I remember I was trying to help her restore – give her advice on restoration of some paintings of hers that a mythological dog had ran over. It was a dog that did not exist, but he left tracks on her paintings – a strange lady. [Laughter.]

MR. MATTESON: Okay.

MR. DE FOREST: And she wanted advice on how to restore the areas that the dog broke the painting surface, so I gave her some sage advice on it.

MR. MATTESON: The – is there any relation aside from the technical one that you just mentioned between what you do on paper and is there – are your drawings before the final painting or are they independent?

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, they can be. My way about going about painting is anything that will work, and nothing works for very long. [Laughter.] But I did so – I did so much drawing after a certain point for commercial reasons and because essentially I was just interested in it. My view of drawing is that

it's all synthetic – abstract and synthetic and made up. I made no effort to – Wayne and I were completely diametrically opposed on that issue. His concept of these would be in the great line of Western tradition: you observe the world and from that you abstract an issue and find a way to – by drawing and find a way to create a linear structure that represents Mona Lisa [ca. 1508] – whatever.

My attitude is that you take and put a bunch of lines down and then you look and see how the lines relate to each other, and very much like building a house you add – you take these different physical constructs and build a network that may represent something. It sounds – maybe the issue would be the same as Wayne because we both value drawing very highly. We've talked about that, but my approach to it was quite different than his.

And I remember the days he – and those few times he taught next door to me – a drawing course and it was sort of interesting to see what was going on and we were doing completely different exercises. I always – I love teaching drawing and it would be – I would create little scenarios with material that people could use, and I was reasonably successful at it in this odd sort of way of going about it.

MR. MATTESON: Well, the way you described it is a little bit like some of the surrealist ideas. Max Ernst would really often get –

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, yes, he was very interested in, you know, the kind of frottage kind of thing, putting materials together.

MR. MATTESON: Yes, right, and then pulling them apart –

MR. DE FOREST: Pulling them apart.

MR. MATTESON: –and the building from there.

MR. DE FOREST: Very inventive. Very inventive. I think it's – in his case he was interested in the imagery created, and that was a way of creating imagery. And, you know, there's an ancient tradition of seeing in a smudge a face.

MR. MATTESON: Right. Right. Leonardo talks about it.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, and being an art historian I think you could probably given a little time think of – we could come up with a whole series of those things and that approach has always interested me. Arcimboldo, you know, the whole –

MR. MATTESON: You mentioned – what's his name? The French – Moreau. You mentioned some of Moreau's sketches would be very much like that.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah.

MR. MATTESON: Gustave Moreau, where there seem to be swatches of color and then images coming out of them.

MR. DE FOREST: And I did some sculpture for a marble man that Rene de Rosa has in his collection and I did cover the entire surface with marbles, and it turned out – I don't know if you've ever seen that, but it was –

MR. MATTESON: I think I've seen pictures of it. It's one in a big piece of sculpture.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, it was very rich, and I wanted to do something like a full-sized horse covered with marbles, but it was pretty labor intensive and I got out. And there didn't seem to be – I've always done a little bit of sculpture – quite a bit actually.

MR. MATTESON: I was going to talk – talk to you about that because the – you did constructions early on and even when you weren't doing constructions, so many of your paintings like the two pictures we're looking at in this room – incidentally, what are the names of the pictures here on the left?

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, that's Incident at Devil's Island [1992], and I don't know what the name for the other one is [Painting the Big Painting].

MR. MATTESON: The one that's a playoff from –

MR. DE FOREST: I should have read – yeah, on the – you know, on Picasso.

MR. MATTESON: Right. I've seen the Incident before.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, it's been around.

MR. MATTESON: But on both of these you have elaborate frames on them and that's very much – I've seen your workshop where these frames are constructed.

MR. DE FOREST: Now, if you look very carefully, you'll see the face of the artist that protrudes from the canvas. It's 3D.

MR. MATTESON: Yes, I saw that. Yeah.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, so that was an interesting thing, which is part sculpture. I used some foam to do that. And now, in fact, I'm going to go back there. I like that painting so much, although it's a simple painting – this is better – that I'm going to do some of that kind of stuff again – you know, cut off the corners and add the material.

I saw a painting in Hawaii I hadn't seen for years. They had one which I carved wooden forms and stuff to it. It weighed about five tons, but aesthetically it still worked pretty good.

MR. MATTESON: So you've always had this sculptural quality attached to your painting in this addition, this framing, and looking at your constructions from way back, '50s even, when you were doing this, it tended to be wall pieces.

MR. DE FOREST: Painting – I'm concerned with painting, so that came from working in the museum as kind of a gallery assistant and one day it came to me quite often the backs of the paintings are more interesting than the fronts – you know, bad stretchers, stains, and so –

MR. MATTESON: Markings.

MR. DE FOREST: And the concept of the idea on the front was some kind of conventional form of abstract expression, but if you turned around the back and just as a phenomenal event that was more interesting, so that's the derivation of –

MR. MATTESON: I see. How interesting.

MR. DE FOREST: You start with the frame and then add to it.

And then when I was teaching at Yakima J.C., we had an old table saw in the back of the gallery where we had some classes and so you could saw – well you didn't have too much time – saw pieces of wood and glue them together in a whole series of kind of cubist constructions and you can glue together in 3D. And I remember seeing a van Doesburg painting in the San Francisco Museum that had some paint on it, and Cornell – you know, I was always attracted to painters that had some kind of bastard sculpture or painting concept.

MR. MATTESON: You stopped doing sculpture for about 10 years.

MR. DE FOREST: Well, I realized that there was no future in it. You know, if I were 23 and you could rewind your life, the nature of modern sculpture is such that what I was doing was outside the pale, you know. Richard Serra and sculpture has – there isn't much real figurative sculpture anymore that's very potent – a few people do that. You've got to sort of work at it, starting it with Manuel and so forth and then to – and you have to strain to come up with real quality figures of sculpture.

MR. MATTESON: So when you came back, you came back sort of in a big way with sculpture because the stuff I've seen has been large – much larger.

MR. DE FOREST: Well, Allan Frumkin had this idea that essentially I was – if I had a chance to do this stuff, it would take off in New York. You know, he thought it was a great – I had these great undiscovered skills, so he wanted to show a sculpture, and I did do it. It was painful because I wasn't used to it. And he sold a few pieces, but it never became the movement he thought, so – and the way he got me started in this latest – my whole casting career, which is a career I would have been better off without –

MR. MATTESON: Is this the benches?

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, all that stuff.

MR. MATTESON: How did that get – at all get off –

MR. DE FOREST: Well, there was a collector in Chicago. I think he's involved in the Contemporary Museum, rather than the modern museum in Chicago. I guess it's still going. And he wanted some benches – dog benches for the museum and he wanted – he – if I made four, then he would give us one, so I let George Adams talk me into it. And so I didn't have any experience at all with casting, so I got – you know, I knew it was going to be expensive and then I got into it and I pumped quite a bit of my own money in it – you know, $10,000 or $15,000 and then he said they were too expensive. [Laughter.]

So then I was leveraged out there, so the only way I could recover was just to keep going. I don't know if I've broken even.

MR. MATTESON: So where are they now?

MR. DE FOREST: They're all over. I did quiet a few of them, but I never – the casters made a lot of money. And the other – but in the – in doing this I never really – I don't really like one color sculpture. I – you know, well, the Greeks didn't either as a matter of fact.

MR. MATTESON: That's right.

MR. DE FOREST: So I invented this process of being able to put cad red on the bronze and it works, but it's kind of stillborn. My one hope is that George Adams will get tired of it and let it drift away into the night because it's not really – and the things – I saw the one in Hawaii that there were some prints, I thought, and they looked really nice, but there's no – it's not a new trend.

MR. MATTESON: Okay, so that's stopped?

MR. DE FOREST: It hasn't stopped, unfortunately, yet. I'm still – I have another one to paint sometime this month.

MR. MATTESON: I see. Is it down – Is it in the studio that –

MR. DE FOREST: It isn't down there yet. It's supposed to come and I'll paint it, but – and he sold about three pieces, none of which I've gotten paid for, so I'm still – I'm sort of – calculating. I don't know if I'm in the black or not yet. I'm not very far into it, because casting is, you know, really expensive. And I had the misfortune to get a caster who was a friend of mine that I've known for abut 30 years, but a very perverse individual, so he just about drove me nuts with – he got the wrong powder coater of – then I finally got switched away from him and I used a caster in Sacramento who is a very decent guy and we don't have any problems. I've got the whole process worked out.

And you could actually make paintings with it.

MR. MATTESON: Really?

MR. DE FOREST: Well, yes, on aluminum panels, which are available, you could – with that process you could have some very durable outside paintings. You know, you might get 25 years out in the sun. It's called lumiflon, the Japanese product they use, is about twice as durable as an acrylic molecule. It's a carbo-fluoride compound and they – you know, remember my chemistry, the molecule is such that it's very evenly balanced. It's not broken up –

MR. MATTESON: Stable.

MR. DE FOREST: – very easy with ultraviolet light and so you would think, now, that someone would make an artists' paint.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. DE FOREST: If I ever see Mark Golden again I'll ask him about it. It is more expensive, but it's much more durable.

MR. MATTESON: Well, speaking of durable media, you worked with tile – ceramics.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah.

MR. MATTESON: And you had that commission – the energy council – the energy commission in Sacramento which – how did you get into tiles?

MR. DE FOREST: Well, they give you these contracts and they want something that will last 500 years and so that was the reason.

MR. MATTESON: Had you worked with tiles before? Ceramics?

MR. DE FOREST: No, but I just got a big piece of paper – a big, you know, 10 – 12-foot high paper and got samples of tile by going to Mexico and I got a palette of individual colors of the glazes. So then I mixed up batches of color matches and then the big scenario was in my studio. And then I rolled those up and sent them to Mexico and they had some local artists or peons there or whatever you would call them paint each tile.

MR. MATTESON: I see.

MR. DE FOREST: Then I installed it, and that I came out a little bit ahead on, but not –

MR. MATTESON: Were you satisfied with the end result?

MR. DE FOREST: Insofar – you know, considering the process, I thought it was all right. You know, it's – and it's been pretty durable except the – at the time, cobalt was very expensive, so they had – they were cobalt blue glazed – they achieved on it and they had to ship one of – a couple of those tiles and reglaze them. Otherwise, it's lasted pretty well.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, it's a long piece.

MR. DE FOREST: It's about 60 feet long.

MR. MATTESON: Really?

MR. DE FOREST: They were going to have another panel, but they cancelled that and that's – what profit I got was –

MR. MATTESON: And that was a – the history of California?

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, and I had a 90 feet and unfortunately they cancelled that and that's what profit I had came from that. Okay, I'll let you up here. And –

MR. MATTESON: There's a puppy. What's the puppy's name?

MR. DE FOREST: Cato.

MR. MATTESON: Cato.

MR. DE FOREST: The Green Hornet's right-hand man. But I'm going to put you down in your chair here. Okay.

[Cross talk about puppy's location in room]

MR. MATTESON: That brings up the question of how did you think up that narrative that you had have in the tiles for the Sacramento –

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, I just – there were some books on California history and I tried to make something that looked kind of decent without getting into – you know. You know, try to work out a scenario. What do you call it? It worked okay. I don't think it's great, but it worked out from a warming kind of into public art.

MS. : [Off mike.]

MR. DE FOREST: What?

MS. : [Off mike.]

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, he's up here all right.

MS. : [Off mike.]

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, okay. [Audio break.] So I didn't have any desire to get heavily into public art.

MR. MATTESON: The Sacramento project and the scale of the project and the way in which you used kind of a narrative reminds me a little bit of scroll painting, and that leads up to the book that you did, the Journey to the Canine Territory [and the Unexplored Territory Beyond Terrier Pass, 1988] book and how that got to be and whether or not the two are related or –

MR. DE FOREST: Not really. Let me see. There's this real estate person, I guess you'd call a millionaire. Peter – I can't think of his last name. He was actually in the county and he's made and lost a couple of fortunes, but his wife's a very nice lady – a wonderful woman, very friendly – they started an art publishing firm and that's of course a good way to lose money as Allan Frumkin says. So their editors got in touch with me and wanted me to do something – a book on drawings and that's how it all turned out.

MR. MATTESON: I see.

MR. DE FOREST: And then he wanted me to do another one because he wanted to get a – he thought I could do maybe something like Chris Van Allsburg who he could actually turn a profit, but I never quite got going because it – that kind of thing takes a lot more time than you think. You spend six months on that and –

MR. MATTESON: Who thought of the scroll idea, the fold-out idea?

MR. DE FOREST: That was the editor.

MR. MATTESON: Okay. Were you comfortable with it?

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, I was – you know, I did about 23 drawings and then the owner of the publishing firm bought the whole series. So it was – you know, reasonably profitable for the time and it was kind of fun to do.

MR. MATTESON: Did you – so those drawings, were there a continuous narrative? Was there a continuous narrative?

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, sort of one faded into another and then it went around the back. But we just saw it as an interlude, just something that came out of the blue.

MR. MATTESON: The reason why I ask that is that of course the first one thinks of is Chinese scroll painting. There's so many of those things around. So many of the subjects deal with journeys of a scholar to a particular mountain or –

MR. DE FOREST: I've done some other long drawings, six feet, three by six, and so forth. I just had a show in Massachusetts that didn't really do anything commercially of six or seven foot drawings. So there have been interludes where you try that kind of scroll thing.

And then there was a certain kind of narrative aspect of probably most of the work that I do.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, well I want to get into that. Yeah. In looking at your work there – people always talk about it in kind of naïve or primitive or whatever, but as an art historian I see loads of references. And in talking to you I know that there's a lot of knowledge that goes into everything that you talk about and make. And you mentioned, as we discussed when I decided to do this interview, a lot of different artists that you've been attracted to use and have looked at and at one point – I read somewhere you consider all this kind of swipe file.

MR. DE FOREST: Well, I think every artist is – you know, every field of intellectual endeavor you're standing on people that have done it before.

MR. MATTESON: You said that you consider yourself as a French Huguenot American painter. What does that mean?

MR. DE FOREST: Well, I don't know if I can define that term. Price pumped that out of me.

MR. MATTESON: Price Amerson?

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah. Paolo Uccello is maybe my all-time favorite artist and, you know, the whole Rout of San Romano panels – wonderful, marvelous paintings and that stuff is solid.

MR. MATTESON: Is it the perspectival play in that particular picture?

MR. DE FOREST: Just the horses and the animals and the very complicated structure of different shapes impacting other shapes and he's – some historians thought of him as a precursor to cubism. You can make a good case for that. That and, you know, Cezanne and Mondrian.

MR. MATTESON: Mondrian is one artist most people would never associate with you. It's obviously not a literal influence.

MR. DE FOREST: No, but it's the way he put spots of color together. I don't know how this kind of fake, naïve thing – some bad critic, you know, threw in the idea because, you know, it looks like it's there, but actually it's – I'm more – I just think of trying to do something as clearly as possible. At the same time, do it a little differently. And so then you end up with something that's not directly based on the history of Western realist painting.

MR. MATTESON: Because you're not copying it.

MR. DE FOREST: I'm not, and, you know, it might be partially Chinese, partially Uccello. And then primitive painting is also a source.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. DE FOREST: If you reject the like Picasso's art they're all inspired by primitivism. And so that's where that comes in. It's usually bad criticism. It's a way of kind of disparaging what you do and not really analyzing it.

MR. MATTESON: It's an easy handle.

MR. DE FOREST: It's an easy handle and if – I suppose if I had more traditional drawing in my painting I probably would maybe get more respect, but – and it's not that I don't like some of, you know, Ingres, the great French classicist. It's very abstract drawing.

Japanese drawing, which is another source, so you throw all that together and, you know, I've –

MR. MATTESON: You've mentioned Léger before.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: What do you like about his work?

MR. DE FOREST: Well, John Guttmann got me interested. It's one of his favorite artists, and all that big – you know, girls on the bicycle thing. I just saw the way these big forms sit up there – are really imposing. And I've often so liked painting that has a certain kind of visual attack – you know, digs a hole in the wall. And I, you know, some of that I've been able to –

MR. MATTESON: And with Matisse, that's one who is a flat painter. I can see the color of it.

MR. DE FOREST: But very clever at pushing shapes around and filling the whole painting with – a corner, with a color and I think I have found enough to know probably a greater source than maybe Picasso or Matisse, you know, is some of those paintings are really kind of an education on how to –

MR. MATTESON: Which ones do you think – can you think of any?

MR. DE FOREST: Well, some of those where he has his studio with a series of paintings sitting around. They had a show at the San Francisco Museum when I was a gallery assistant there, so I looked at those for an entire month. But from the standpoint of color and the way he arranges these shapes somehow, it's real instructions.

MR. MATTESON: Without any conflict.

MR. DE FOREST: No. About how to go about mixing – adding colors and I think he wrote something once that I thought was really apropos: one color calls up another and so forth. And then he ended up with something that tired businessmen can look at –

MR. MATTESON: That's right, which the surrealists hated.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes. Moreau – you know, French paintings – that particular aspect of French painting is a great stimulus, and you only see that now maybe in Latin American painting or – American painting has gone off into conceptualism to a large extent. You know, there's not much you can get for Agnes Martin as to a new way to approach it. You know, I don't disparage her or anything, but if you're trying to get new ideas, that's not where to look for it. It's too narrow.

MR. MATTESON: Now, when you – just for a moment I want to go back to Mondrian just for a second because one of the things that has always intrigued me about Mondrian, and you mention it in some of your writings, people just look at the pictures and think it's just a formal arrangement of colors and shapes and proportions, but really his intention was to go beyond that.

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, yes, all these tracks. You know, he wanted to create a pattern of reality.

MR. MATTESON: That's right.

MR. DE FOREST: A structure that would demonstrate the ebb and flow of life and existence – the whole bit.

MR. MATTESON: Right, and you – do you see that as part of your –

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, in a more kind of general way. I'm also kind of a – I try to throw a lot of stuff in. And my concept is the more variety you have in a painting, the better off you are. I'm –

MR. MATTESON: Which is just as anti-Mondrian as possible.

MR. DE FOREST: Well, it's also anti-current painting style.

MR. MATTESON: That's right.

MR. DE FOREST: Which is – oh, you can pick any kind of example of current painting. I'm trying to grasp it – particularly current abstract painting. Peter Halley.

MR. MATTESON: Hmm, I don't know –

MR. DE FOREST: You know, I think it's – oh, those grid paintings. They're called grids and kind of like electrical diagrams and so they're hot. And they're kind of striking, but they're not – they're relatively simple. They tend towards the – every painter since Frank Stella tends towards big objects that are not intensely complex.

MR. MATTESON: I – minimalism –

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, it all tends towards minimalism. And minimalism – it's kind of destructive in the sense that it's gone as far as it can in a certain kind of extreme. There's not much left of it with the same ideology.

MR. MATTESON: I just saw a show in Los Angeles at MOCA [Museum of Contemporary Art] –

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, yes.

MR. MATTESON: – on minimalism.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah.

MR. MATTESON: And it's minimalism from the beginning till about I think 1970. I'm not sure. And I have to say, I went through the show very quickly. There were a few things that were fabulous. Some were some Eva Hesse drawings.

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, there's some interesting stuff, but there's not much you can build on. For a young painter, it's pointless. You got to get to the left of that?

MR. MATTESON: How?

MR. DE FOREST: You've got to get to the left of Agnes Martin, so what do you do? You just space out your lines. There are – you know, there's – I looked at the six most expensive painters in the world –

MR. MATTESON: Oh yeah, the Art News issue.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, and I couldn't agree with much of any of it. Cy Twombly, for instance, I just find abysmally uninteresting. It doesn't – everyone has a right to do what they want to, and I don't think he's a bit worried about any criticism I would have of him, but I just find his painting uninteresting. And that's fine – you know, it takes different types to – I'm all for variety.

MR. MATTESON: Your work has, especially with the dogs to get back to that. Those appear in aboriginal art. Did you know about the aboriginal things –

MR. DE FOREST: I don't know if they generated – they didn't – that wasn't the immediate source of it. I've always liked aboriginal painting, and Gloria and I went to Australia to see – I guess we went – theoretically just to go down and see the Australia Open, which we saw parts of, but then we trudged around trying to find young Australian painters, it's the wrong time of the year and there's some of it–modicum amount of interest, but the thing that really affected me was the aboriginal painting.

It's amazing when you get really essentially stone-age people generating some really impressive abstract paintings.

MR. MATTESON: Sophisticated –

MR. DE FOREST: You now, they didn't go to art school, but some of that stuff is really imposing. I mean, compare it to Cy Twombly, it – visually it just tears up a wall. And the thing that's so amazing about it, it seems to be replete with meaning dealing with, like Mondrian, landscape.

MR. MATTESON: Yes.

MR. DE FOREST: An all-over landscape, which I feel very akin to. When I left abstract expressionism I was doing these big what looked like, you know, landscapes from the airplane and so I felt very close to that.

MR. MATTESON: I was going to bring that up. Yeah.

MR. DE FOREST: And for a while I tried to generate, I guess, from it. And I think it can, but I haven't so far. But the other thing that I was amazed about is how well the acrylic paint and, you know, brushes fit into their ideas. The acrylic paint was made for these guys and I bought a whole bunch of books and the whole movement was started by a white guy that was an art teachers and the only job he could get – and I appreciate that because – [laughter.]

MR. MATTESON: – Of your checkered past.

MR. DE FOREST: He got this job at the aboriginal reservation and he was a painting student and he was trying to do his own stuff, so he's out there teaching kids and he rounded up some paint and some pieces of cardboard and the kids started painting on it, but then the old people started to group in and they wanted paint too. And they have these kinds of images that kind of belong to them traditionally, so they wanted to execute these. And so it wasn't too long before he, you know, got a roll of canvas and stretching canvas and then they started sewing it and since the government had set up circumstances that they were in a hell of a shape – you know, really. They really were discriminated against and they were able to make a little money and so it took off like wildfire.

It kind of burned the guy out, though, after about seven or eight years just doing this and being a sales agent and everything, so he left. Said I'm just burned out. But he changed – he started the whole movement and someone pointed out it's on the last great primitive tradition, at least the painting. It may be the best painting. You know, compared with other primitive traditions, it's very potent painting. I feel very akin to what they're trying to say, the way they're saying it – everything. It really – I really responded to that stuff. I'd love to own one.

MR. MATTESON: They've gotten very expensive.

MR. DE FOREST: Very expensive, and more power to them, you know.

MR. MATTESON: And obviously there's a lot of – you're interested in outside art too. I mean –

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, it's the same issue. A lot of that stuff's not too interesting, but selected examples can really be amazing. There's some amazing painters that –

MR. MATTESON: And sculptures too.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, crop up from time to time. You know, in the course I had – I taught at San Quentin for a while and, you know, they had guys in class that did things like one really nice black man that did marvelous paintings like snakes segmented in the sky. And most of what they did really was people with big eyeballs, and I discovered that the main reason a lot of those people were there is that they weren't too bright, and in this society – a capitalist society, you discriminate against people that – the divinity – great big in the sky – wasn't endowed greatly in that area, and I think that's most unfortunate.

But occasionally you would see something at prison – not as often as people would think, but every now and then. And about at the same average as you would find at outside just looking at what's being done now. How much stuff is really potent? How much is just really dull? And anyone that's on – I'm sure you have no illusions about that, which artists you've looked at, but there's just acres and acres of just abysmally boring stuff generated under the name of art.

MR. MATTESON: A lot of it's in the art magazines.

MR. DE FOREST: Absolutely. And a lot of it is taken extremely seriously. So I never met a self-respecting painter that in their own mind didn't cull a lot of that. I – and then Hassel Smith – it was one of the great things about Hassel, if he didn't like things he would say so. And a lot of what, you know, passed for art had been wiped. And then the other occasion he would like the strangest things you'd never think that he would like.

So my attitude is the more the merrier. It's a little bit about the attitude I had about religion, is that I hate intolerance. I think one of the issues we have in this country is it's not Christianity, but Christian intolerance. It's almost the Gibbon's explanation of the fall of the Roman Empire. It came about because of Christianity, because it was very tolerant and rich. The Romans would have never have bothered them if they could say, well, it's all right to believe and then if they could say, well, it's all right to believe in Minerva or Zeus or all that. [END TAPE 2, SIDE B.] That's the one thing they demand, a variety of religions. And, you know, our president politically came to power because he values one religion. There's a lot of beliefs in this country and they are all valid as far as I know. I'm not going to discriminate. My own beliefs probably –

MR. MATTESON: It's like food. It's like eating the same kind of food all the time.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, or maybe nearer Buddhism than they are traditional Christianity or the Muslim belief. And it's amazing that, you know, we are coming to grips with the journey to the Holy Land now – Christianity versus the Muslim world, and it's futile. We ought to be civilized enough at this time to live and let live.

MR. MATTESON: Right. I wanted to ask you, in one place you – at one point you said you were a poetic artist.

MR. DE FOREST: Well –

MR. MATTESON: What did you mean by that?

MR. DE FOREST: Well, I think art – painting, as I see it, is poetry in a larger sense, like [William Blake] Tiger, Tiger, burning in the forest of the night –

MR. MATTESON: Right.

MR. DE FOREST: – yeah, you know, a good artist.

MR. MATTESON: Good artist.

MR. DE FOREST: And I'm in the – you know, it was a good thought and it was a good pair, and so I decided it's basically a kind of poetry – visual poetry.

MR. MATTESON: Do you – to get to – finally – talk about that you like in literature and in reading, you talked – when we last – toward the end of our last session you talked about your delight in Victorian literature – Victorian novels and travel books. But in poetry, what do you read, or what have you read that you –

MR. DE FOREST: Well, I haven't read much lately, just sort of the – you know, Blake, T.S. Eliot. Actually, I have read a lot of T.S. Eliot – quite a conservative man, but a very potent poet. And then the Dadaists were interested in poetry.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. DE FOREST: The surrealists were – you know, some of them were practicing poets. And I sort of learned to write when I was in high school just by trying to write poetry. I think it's a good way to learn to write. And I wish now at this state that I had taken more English courses and maybe fewer mathematics courses because at that time the idea of what I was going to do involved that, and as it turned out – I can kind of read the Scientific America with more understanding, but I would have been better off with English courses career-wise.

MR. MATTESON: Did you read the Surrealists at all? The reason why I mention that is that there was a – in one of the catalogs that I saw just yesterday – I was at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art library looking through some of the stuff in there –

MR. DE FOREST: I have never been to that library– I used to – I was – I have been to it many times in the old –

MR. MATTESON: Yes, right.

MR. DE FOREST: – [inaudible] –building. I used to –

MR. MATTESON: Well, it's quite –

MR. DE FOREST: Different. I'm sure that they have a lot more –

MR. MATTESON: It's quite the security – it's not casual.

MR. DE FOREST: Well, I think getting there would be like getting into the State Department.

MR. MATTESON: It's really – is difficult.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, and –

MR. MATTESON: But they're very nice once you go in.

MR. DE FOREST: Well, I'm sure they would be, being an art historian –

MR. MATTESON: Very accommodating.

MR. DE FOREST: – You could get in.

MR. MATTESON: They didn't ask, actually.

MR. DE FOREST: I probably could myself.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, I'm sure you could. They knew about you so if you mention, I want to go to look at the Roy De Forest file – they were happy to oblige. But in one of the catalogs that they had there – I think it was a show that you had in Utah not too long ago with another artist – his name I can't quite recall.

MR. DE FOREST: New Mexico, maybe?

MR. MATTESON: No.

MR. DE FOREST: It was Utah.

MR. MATTESON: I want to say Gaylen Hanson.

MR. DE FOREST: I had a show with Gaylen Hanson that essentially takes place in the Northwest.

MR. MATTESON: That was it.

MR. DE FOREST: It might have gone to Utah – I'm not sure it did. He was here not long ago.

MR. MATTESON: Oh – interesting painter.

MR. DE FOREST: Interesting painter – it's a guy I have known for years. We used to work at the same junior college of maybe two years apart, and then he moved on to Washington State and Yakima J.C., and I met him there.

MR. MATTESON: It was funny to look at the catalog – because he got his MFA from USC, where I taught –

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, he is a painter I probably had, I think legitimately, some influence on, you see.

MR. MATTESON: Interesting. Well, anyway, in that catalog there was this quote, and I want to read it to you. It's by Rene Crevel who is a Surrealist poet, and it was a very – I thought a very apposite quotation. He says, "The poet does not put the animals to sleep in order to play the tamer, but, leaves the cages wide open, the keys thrown to the winds, he journeys forth, a traveler who thinks not of himself, but of the voyage, of dream beaches, forests of hands, soul-endowed animals, all undeniable surreality."

MR. DE FOREST: That's a beautiful piece of poetry.

MR. MATTESON: Isn't that nice?

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah. Actually, John Updike wrote a review of me –

MR. MATTESON: I read it.

MR. DE FOREST: – once that is very nice because it – and very knowledgeable – you know, dealing with something or some relation. I think he did that very well.

MR. MATTESON: You know, he compared you to some Hindu painting.

MR. DE FOREST: Well – Persian.

MR. MATTESON: Persian. That's right, Moghul painting.

MR. DE FOREST: Moghul painting – those elements are in that.

MR. MATTESON: So – and in some of the things that you have said, you maintain that your process in painting in your art, or the process that you have worked with in your art is one of magic – I mean, it's a magical process. It's an arena where you create hither and yon.

MR. DE FOREST: Well, as Jean Varda said, "Art is the last stronghold of magic." It's a beautiful little saying.

MR. MATTESON: You are – it's a kind of Magus-like role.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, yes, yes, it's – well, which poetry is also –

MR. MATTESON: Right.

MR. DE FOREST: So that is what makes the surrealistic tradition very important, meaning that surrealism runs through practically everything.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. DE FOREST: It's really significant.

MR. MATTESON: I have got to ask you this question because it's – and you have been asked it so many times now that I sort of feel silly to ask it, but there is this – I would like ask you about the use of animals in your painting. Is this a process of – with the dogs, with the horses, with the cows and so on, is this a process of, sort of, the kind of dislocation of rational perceptions of the world?

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, well, I will explain where it came from – really strange – art comes from art. I went to London one time on – with some college group. We stayed in a dormitory at the Royal College of Art, which was an interesting experience because – I kind of lost my train of thought. Well, I saw a David Hockney painting –

MR. MATTESON: Oh.

MR. DE FOREST: –in this guy's apartment, and you may have even seen it; it has been reproduced occasionally. There's two gay guys in this kind of – looks like a bell jar taking a shower –

MR. MATTESON: Oh, yeah.

MR. DE FOREST: – and then from the corner is this enormous –

MR. MATTESON: Yes.

MR. DE FOREST: – mastiff or something leaping on them, and I looked at that and I said, "What a great idea." You know, he also did the painting – I like The Cruel Elephant [1962] – or is it the – when he was a student – the big elephant painting.

And I was flying home and I said, you know, that's – when you are on a farm – see, I grew up on a farm, I had dog after dog and cows and horses – and I thought, well, maybe you should try to paint something about your past, something that interested you. So I did, and I am going to have a show in New York that's mostly going to be all dog paintings.

I don't feel bad about that because it's a sense you are painting colors and shapes. Dogs are just as legitimate as – I mean, what do you got to paint in a – you know, portraits of people, men, women, animals, a landscape. There you have covered about most of the history of painting. Now you can go on to certain more contemporaneous designs – circles and squares, flat color walls, drawing on walls – and all that is kind of late, you know, but I'm just recapitulating the history of art. Most of – you know, three-quarters or more of all painting consists of all this material, which is fascinating to look at.

MR. MATTESON: Exhausting, too.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, just – and it's like normal painting. If you see a good example of that, it's –

MR. MATTESON: It's pretty good.

MR. DE FOREST: – first-class painting.

MR. MATTESON: I have got a couple myself.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, and, you know, it's – I don't know of all the kinds of contemporaneous – people would look at – very few of them come up to that level when you really get down to it.

MR. MATTESON: I think your animal painting is the best painting with Moghul painting.

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, yes, it's just – and you can look at Jasper Johns – it's a pretty decent painting, but I don't know if it is any better than Moghul painting. You know, people have a tendency to think fashion and painting are the same thing – the latest fashion is the best, but stuff has been done for god knows how long, some of it is just incredible.

MR. MATTESON: Looking at the painting across the wall over there, the one with the Picasso quotation from – Demoiselles d'Avignon – there is the painter, the self – is that a self-portrait? Did you –

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, kind of.

MR. MATTESON: It's a figure that occurs over and over.

MR. DE FOREST: I did a series of paintings on that kind of motif – a big easel where you have an excuse to lay out paint. So that was a few years ago, and I did a whole series of those – maybe five

or six.

There was one very good one that has both corners sliced off and then the painter of the rainforest – a guy standing in a jungle tree with his easel painting on – you know, up in a tree. That's the best of the whole series. But I think I – since I have gotten this stuff back, I decided to go back and just paint, and I think I see these two – they are virtually the same color. I think in late years I have been moving into more variety and I think I'm going to do that.

MR. MATTESON: In other words, go back a little bit more.

MR. DE FOREST: Well, I think I'm just going to get more variety in color and I think I'm going to move away from the Mondrian way of organizing paint, of shapes – more just one thing stated once. Everything you state in a painting – this struck me lately – should be absolutely different in size, shape and so forth, and get rid of this bilateral symmetry and the underpinnings of Mondrian – I haven't done anything since I made this decision and – you can have great plans that go astray. [Laughs.]

MR. MATTESON: So it's in the pressure cooker now.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, and it will eventually come out. I find that I've had had millions of ideas which only about five or six have ever worked. You are always thinking about ideas that – most of them never work, or only parts. I guess that is the challenge you accept.

That is why I always liked playing tennis. I played a lot of it not because I was an incredible tennis player, but I kind of thought it was like painting because the technique was so complex you could never get good at it. It's like drawing. You get better at drawing but you don't really attain the highest level – very rarely, because it's just – the technique is so complex. And even your knowledge about what you are doing is often so stupid. [Laughs.] Maybe a little later you will say, why did I do something as dumb as that?

And of course a lot of the things are just accidents. If you paint long enough you are probably going to have something that is pretty nice just by accident. That was the idea of abstract expression – you know, a successful accident. Then the accidents started to look very similar.

MR MATTESON: [Laughs.] I think we can end it now.

MR. DE FOREST: Well, it's – you know, this occurred to me the other day – there is always this thing – someone is going to write a book about you. Would you be interested in writing a little piece if I ever generate something?

[Audio break.]

MR. MATTESON: This is an addendum to our conversation of May 26, 2004 and it's the fourth disc of four.

Roy, we were talking about philosophy and – after we stopped the tape recorder – and now, it's really getting – you were talking about your preference for the linguistic –

MR. DE FOREST: We were talking about the French philosophy –

MR. MATTESON: Right –

MR. DE FOREST: – of deconstruction and I – of course, then I started talking about Wittgenstein – Ludwig Wittgenstein –

MR. MATTESON: Right. Which I confess I have never read.

MR. DE FOREST: – and Philosophical Speculations [Philosophical Investigations, 1963] a fascinating book. And I read it and it influenced how I think about art.

MR. MATTESON: In what way?

MR. DE FOREST: Both that – Heidegger. I read a lot of Heidegger – "Up from the ground of metaphysics" – and I'm not sure I ever understood Heidegger. But, you know, that wasn't so important in thinking about what this guy could possibly mean in laying down this material in the way he did. It made me start thinking of a different way of looking at things –

MR. MATTESON: Right.

MR. DE FOREST: – and that is true of Wittgenstein. So you get – you may be much more calculating about what – how you think and what you say, and what you do and what it means.

MR. MATTESON: The – but you have read all the English philosophers, you say, very –

MR. DE FOREST: A little bit, yeah.

MR. DE FOREST: Hume.

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, Hume – I read a lot of Hume.

MR. MATTESON: Locke.

MR. DE FOREST: Locke. You know, the English tradition – I guess we call it Empiricist tradition – always interested me more than the so-called Kant and that whole tradition, except his essay for Sartre, who is really worth reading. You know from an artistic standpoint, that was a considerable writer.

MR. MATTESON: His private life was a mess. He was a Stalinist, he –

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, he was – well, French thinkers tend to have very confused outlooks on the world.

MR. MATTESON: You read – you named your son Pascal. Was it because of the philosopher-mathematician?

MR. DE FOREST: Well, I had read a little Pascal. It was just – I think Gloria named him, you know, and I am kind of a French Huguenot and so I said – oh, it's a good name.

MR. MATTESON: Beautiful name.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, well, I wish it would make him more logical –

MR. MATTESON: [Laughs.]

MR. DE FOREST: – but it hasn't.

MR. MATTESON: [Laughs.] But did you – do you still read philosophy?

MR. DE FOREST: I haven't for a while. I have picked up a book of the history of philosophy and, you know, read through the whole damn thing. Well, I haven't read – occasionally, when I read material that talks about philosophy, I will look up and read a synopsis to see what they are trying to say and I tried to get into deconstruction. And I have read a few things and I – it just – I have always resisted that – Jacques Maritain, and – I was taking his courses at San Francisco State. They had whole – and I would try to read him. I could read Jaspers, and I remember this guy, Marcel, who is a Christian existentialist. But at a certain point I just throw up my hands. I couldn't wade through it. I didn't believe what they were saying to begin with.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah. Sartre is the most approachable of the French – at least in my mind –

MR. DE FOREST: Well, he wrote –

MR. MATTESON: Not through his philosophy so much as through his fiction.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, but he – he had a nice style. He wrote –

MR. MATTESON: One of the best books on Sartre is by Iris Murdoch.

MR. DE FOREST: I think I heard that, yes.

MR. MATTESON: She is very good.

MR. DE FOREST: There was actually some lady at Davis, Marjorie Greene –

MR. MATTESON: I knew her, yes.

MR. DE FOREST: – that wrote a history of existentialism. I read it but I don't remember too much what it's about. She was at Davis for years. And then I read a little Dewey.

Oh, I knew a guy called Ralph Barton Perry – good friend of mine in art school, an older guy whose father was Ralph Barton Perry, the associate of Dewey. Ralph Barton Perry was a philosopher at Harvard and Dewey was a philosopher at Yale and they were both – what's the word for them – what is the word for that kind of philosophy? I started saying utilitarian, but it's not.

MR. MATTESON: Pragmatism?

MR. DE FOREST: Pragmatism, yeah. [Inaudible.] And actually, in general, I read a lot of – [inaudible] – history of sailing ships.

MR. MATTESON: [Laughs.]

MR. DE FOREST: History of dirigibles, and a lot of the science – history of how to do something.

MR. MATTESON: Technical things.

MR. DE FOREST: Technical things.

MR. MATTESON: History of technology?

MR. DE FOREST: History of technology, particularly material that has a real pictorial quality. I have

got a book about the history of French aircraft – the early – and as sculpture – they are fascinating, just absolutely fascinating. The weird things that the human spirit can construct and apply.

MR. MATTESON: Well, a ship is pretty unusual when you think about it.

MR. DE FOREST: All that kind of thing – you know, history of technology as kind of – I like the idea of building, you know. I think that is how I got into the whole thing with building things when I was a kid.

MR. MATTESON: You did canoes, as I read somewhere –

MR. DE FOREST: Well, I used to – like, you would have – you would carve your planks and you would slit up corn cobs and make Viking ships, and on the farm – people now look at the – and you put plastic, you got to let the – there was no television when I was growing up.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. DE FOREST: And in a way, it has done a lot of damage. I – when I was teaching, I found that college students had very little ability to use their hands to make – do anything. There was a rare one that wouldn't cut themselves with a mat knife or something. Art Schade is coming tonight, and I used to talk about this a lot because he is very ingenious about putting things together, put hot rods together. And along that tradition, American life is kind of dying, is being replaced by video games and television.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. DE FOREST: A loss. And it's bad because that was a major factor in how Americans looked at the world – building things, many things, that is all gone now.

You know bully for Bill Gates. He has done a lot and he is not a bad guys and, you know, he has given a lot to education, but he has helped destroy that aspect of things.

MR. MATTESON: Did you make model planes?

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, I did all that – model planes. I was never too good at a lot of it but even not being too good, after a while, you got better. And college students now are tremendously clumsy in putting those things together.

MR. MATTESON: It's true, it's all with the computer.

MR. DE FOREST: And that is useful but that makes you think of everything in a different way – in a quite abstract way.

MR. MATTESON: And I don't know what it does to human relationships.

MR. DE FOREST: Well, that is a whole other issue. It probably has a destructive effect on – too many people get so used to talking to their computer.

MR. MATTESON: Or through it.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, so the whole fashion of conversation is going to be a dying art –

MR. MATTESON: That is very true.

MR. DE FOREST: It's practically dead.

MR. MATTESON: Very true. It's an – in places like Ireland or Italy –

MR. DE FOREST: It's still going on?

MR. MATTESON: It's still going on.

MR. DE FOREST: What did you do in art history? How did you get interested in that.

MR. MATTESON: I had a very good high school teacher.

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, in art history.

MR. MATTESON: No, it was art appreciation.

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, oh, okay, yeah.

MR. MATTESON: He just – he became a mentor for most of my life.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, that makes sense.

MR. MATTESON: He was a very influential guy.

[Audio break.]

MR. MATTESON: This is the third meeting with Roy De Forest at his home in Port Costa. The date is June 30th, 2004.

Roy, I just wanted to pick up a few loose ends from our conversations previous. One of the things I wanted to ask you was your activity as a printmaker and what got you interested in it. I know you worked at Tamarind in '78 and several places afterwards, I think.

MR. DE FOREST: I –

MR. MATTESON: Did you work in that as a student first?

MR. DE FOREST: I worked as a student. I took a lithography course with Hassel Smith, who wasn't a print specialist, and I just started working at it and when I was at the California School of Fine Arts I did about as much of that as I did painting.

MR. MATTESON: Oh.

MR. DE FOREST: And then I did some at San Francisco State, and after I left school, there was an opportunity to maybe buy some equipment that came up and then I rejected that because I thought that I would just be making prints. But since I made lithographs and printed them, then I got later involved with – was asked to go to Tamarind and got involved in making prints, and because I had printed them, I had sort of a feel for the medium. And as I think Goya pointed out – because Goya made a few lithographs – it was invented just as he was finishing up his career, and he said, "If you can draw, you can make a lithograph." And it is all about drawing – straight color medium – and so I – over the years, I did a lot of prints.

MR. MATTESON: But with the prints, the – what's lost is that tactile element in the painting.

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, yeah, there is a – I got into – the only way you can entertain yourself making prints is – well, is to try to do something that was a technical addition – a new way of doing it – or it would turn out to be more boring. And I tried all kinds of things – you know, grinding crayon into the stone with crayons between the two stones and all sorts of weird things over the years. But you are right; it is limited tactically. But lithography is a great color-bent medium, and I made one hell of a lot of prints over the years.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah. At Tamarind, you collaborated with –

MR. DE FOREST: Well, you collaborate with the printer, basically, which is good because while I could print, it's something like you have to – you have to do it all the time. It's like trying to go to Wimbledon and play tennis if you haven't played – you know, if you don't practice and all that. You wouldn't do very well.

MR. MATTESON: And that collaborative thing – you – that didn't bother you?

MR. DE FOREST: No, that didn't bother me at all because they had some interesting printers there who would just modify, you were apt to deal with the printers.

MR. MATTESON: Nothing really changed in terms of the content of the images from the printing to the painting. It just – or did you find –

MR. DE FOREST: Well, printmaking has got its own interior logic, as it were, and prints do change what kind of paper you got, what you can do with it, who is printing it, et cetera, et cetera. It's – printmaking is basically a very technical activity as can – I presume painting is, too. I mean, the whole history of painting is replete with technical invention – van Eyck's – and their use of oil paint. Some people paint over a tempera under-painting a lot, so painting is technical. But it's possible to paint with just straight paint, like acrylics – water, paint and a brush. So you can make it untechnical if you want to.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. DE FOREST: I always taught materials so I was – I have always been interested in the technical aspect of it.

MR. MATTESON: So the – in the printmaking, did you ever find that the technical impediments interfered in any way, or was it –

MR. DE FOREST: No, not really. In a way they kind of helped. I think it's true that there is a certain school of American printmaking typified by – where did they make these, in Indiana or – Risol [ph] Anasatsky [ph] [possibly Abbo Ostrowsky], I think his name was, did a lot of etching and it was kind of very involved, a highly technical thing and it became an end in itself. But in most cases it didn't bother me. I mean, but it is technical, like, particularly the Intaglio branch of it.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. DE FOREST: It tends to be highly replete with all kinds of little skills and a lot of it is involved with kind of embroidery. But lithography and silk-screening tends to be a little less technical. Well, I just got into – I guess I enjoyed coming to doing it over the years. A lot of people used it as a kind of way of generating cash – [inaudible].

MR. MATTESON: And does the replication of the image, as opposed to the painting being unique,

does that interest you in any way or is it just –

MR. DE FOREST: I don't think so, essentially. You have a smaller scale.

MR. MATTESON: I was going to ask you about scale.

MR. DE FOREST: And you find that many painters become very good printmakers, and some of the best people I knew – like Oliveira was a really gifted photographer. James McGarrell was a really great lithographer, too. But –

MR. MATTESON: You mean lithographer for Oliveira – you said photographer.

MR. DE FOREST: Lithographer. Yeah, he was – I could see the – [inaudible] – but he gave it up. You know, he was – but he is very skillful at graphing things. I would say Jim McGarrell would be, too, but that he's not – he began – you know, painting, I think, became more important to him.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah. I wanted to ask you about scale. You work in all kinds of scale, from small to large – really quite large. And again, the pictures just, again, in this room, which is the same as the last conversation – what is the name of the one on the right – on the left there?

MR. DE FOREST: The left – Incident on Devil's Island [?].

MR. MATTESON: That's right, and then I remember the one on the right, which has the Picasso –

MR. DE FOREST: I don't remember the name. I would have to go behind it. I think that came from – while I was a student at California School of Fine Arts, the influence of Clyfford Still and abstract expressionism kind of generated interest in large-scaled canvases. They have to scale the canvas from, say, what you would find in the American scene, which would be the general way the movement, which essentially perceived what you call abstract expressionism. That would be the next major movement, wouldn't you say as an art historian?

But scale became part of it, you know. Oh, who's that – we could point out any number of people that do huge-scale paintings. And there is something to be said for size. In my case, since I put a lot of stuff in the painting – a lot of eventful painting, a little size does help a lot – it's a kind of additive method – and it's actually easier to make if you have got plenty of space and kind of – to do a kind of mural effort as opposed to a small size. And when you come to small size, to make a wonderful small painting is really hard. You have to go back to the van Eyck's – a great painting I saw in the National Gallery on London, The Last of England [1855]. Ford Maddox Brown does a marvelous little circle-y piece. I wish I owned that painting.

MR. MATTESON: That's a beautiful –

MR. DE FOREST: It's just an absolutely gorgeous painting.

So they were able to reduce the brush size, and at a certain time I think I was supposed to – John Berggruen started selling paintings. I started to paint small, and I got better at it – a lot better, but I'm still better at really when I have the scale to do it – 48 inches or not –

MR. MATTESON: – Is what you're comfortable? –

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, yeah, more comfortable – a lot more comfortable. But as you go up, you reach a point where it's – you kind of walk around the block and you have a piece 47. After a while,

it's just the physical handling of the stretcher makes it difficult to deal with. So you want to draw – you want to stop it at a certain point. I think 18 feet is the longest I ever did.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, I have never seen that one. Do you –

MR. DE FOREST: Rene [Rene de Rosa] owns one. I didn't have any desire to –

MR. MATTESON: Replicate that.

MR. DE FOREST: – replicate that, mostly because of the mechanical issue of building the stretchers and all that sort of thing. Right now Earnest Merritt is making all these stretchers – my assistant – and I'm trying to get away from being mired into the mechanics of building stretchers and building frames and that sort of thing that I can do – making very complicated frames. It's amazing how much time we spend – really futilely waste doing that. It gets really complicated. You can make a plan, it won't work, and before you realize it you could have – this is exaggerating a little, but not much – you could have a month of this thing, it doesn't work. You know, it gets – it's no fun painting when you are doing all this.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. DE FOREST: Well, in any case, like my friend Peter Saul, he buys his stretchers and he stretches them and then he paints them, and he doesn't bother, you know – he doesn't frame them, or if he does it's a very simple frame, and so he is able to spend all his time painting. I'm sometimes stuck with all – this preliminary thing and it's starting, as I get older, to occupy a lot of my life I don't really want it to occupy.

MR. MATTESON: Do you find that you work in streaks or are you pretty consistent with down times?

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, I can work in streaks but you always keep working at it. I think it was a period of eight months, because I remember I was teaching at Davis – I didn't do any painting – and the pressure of doing an exhibition work that you are moving or you try to work out all the time and sometimes you slow down, you get bogged down in the paraphernalia. Sometimes I think I – lately, since I had that show, Palm Desert, I have gotten kind of bogged down.

And one of the things to come out of building stuff – I got involved in sculpture as a result of the frames essentially, and then I did quite a variety of straight sculptures.

MR. MATTESON: What time period are you talking about?

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, I don't know, in the last 20 years – 15-20 years. I forget. Just out-and-out sculptures.

MR. MATTESON: So you are saying that you're toying with the frames, the sculptural –

MR. DE FOREST: It started that way.

MR. MATTESON: It started that way and then you sort of extrapolated it into –

MR. DE FOREST: Right, and then you are into the third dimension – always painting.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. DE FOREST: I had no interest in sculpture without the painting. I don't think the Greeks did either –

MR. MATTESON: No, they –

MR. DE FOREST: They painted every damn thing.

MR. MATTESON: Or the pre-Columbians. I noticed that.

MR. DE FOREST: In fact, I think it's a natural state. For some reason, in the Renaissance, I guess, marble and bronze material replaced that. I have no interest – I mean, there is some marble and bronze sculpture but I have no interest in doing that myself. In fact, those silly dog benches I was making – I got involved in this elaborate invention of putting color on the bronze I did not like just bronze.

MR. MATTESON: In your work, do you see any consistent narrative across the years? I mean, aside from the theme of voyaging and traversing landscape and that thing, but do certain personages come back or –

MR. DE FOREST: Well, I see a consistent – a kind of novelistic approach if you consider a novel something that starts in one place and goes some other place and ends up some place. I have always been a novelistic painter, and even when I was making abstract painting it was like creating a map, basically, and the map then turns into a landscape and the landscape adds figures, and that is a little bit of the history of my painting, although it is very influenced by abstract painting, Mondrian and what have you.

MR. MATTESON: Do you have characters in these pictures? I mean, there are some people that you name in some of your pictures.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes. On the other hand –

MR. MATTESON: "Delta Jack" for instance.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, yes, absolutely.

MR. MATTESON: And who are these figures and where do they come from?

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, just from your experience or your fantasy. Hudson River School, a lot of American painting, American Luminism, Hudson River, even 19th century impressionists – American impressionist painting as a – Childe Hassam – I guess he is at a – kind of been trying to revive him lately. And then who is the very skillful painter, a kind of academic painter – oh, that name will come to me – but that is part of it, you know, just the history of American painting.

And telling a story in a larger sense, you know, in the sense that you morally generate a universe as it were, a larger sense of painting that paints a story rather than some kind of mathematical demonstration trying to put on a design and conflicting colors and so forth. I think it's all, in the larger sense, creating a small world as it were.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, you have said that – you have you said you create these small universes with all kinds of paraphernalia, you call it.

[END TAPE 3, SIDE A.]

MR. DE FOREST: Henry Hopkins says – he said my stuff is related to Mark Twain in that you're excavating a childhood. And Uccello and Mondrian could be the polarity there – great Uccello paintings, and the story is marvelous; all of that is simply marvelous, this huge battle scene and all the figures running about, the rabbit on the hill – just a fantastic painter. And I – that would be my – [inaudible] – animals, people in a kind of odd, psychological world he created – couldn't be better.

MR. MATTESON: Do you – in your pictures of – which deal with journeys and so – do you travel much?

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, we travel a little – I mean, not as much as Gloria would like, but I'm always – the western half of the U.S., I have been all over it and it plays – my travels in the western U.S. play a part in the work. You know, we were talking about Utah and Colorado, the landscapes you see, and other just mythological landscapes. And I think my work is probably more related to figures than a landscape.

MR. MATTESON: I was going to ask you about that. When you look at contemporary art now – and you have sort of alluded to this and said a few words about this already, but I just – I'm assuming, or I take from what you said that you don't find much there in the contemporary art scene.

MR. DE FOREST: Well, I'm doing kind of old-fashioned painting, I think, for now. There isn't a heck of a lot at the present moment. There is a rejection of making things, of the concept of art as a window that you open to the universe. It's more a situation where you form a sort of photo-journal on modern life, and the references are literary in a very abstract sense, like very refined poetry in which you don't know the language so that you are able not to use the only – the language idiom that poets have always used. So the visual image – all of the visual imagery in contemporary painting has just dropped out, and even when you think of, say, abstract painting – the kind of painting Mondrian is doing or the series of abstract paintings has just dropped away so that what is left is kind of a gestural thing – you know, words on canvas, various photo offshoots, little reminiscences about a certain personal event that you don't even know and he just referred to it.

The problem is, however, that a lot of it looks alike.

MR. MATTESON: You said that, yeah.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, it tends to – in this pursuit of novelty it seems almost sometimes a pursuit of the same novelty, and I presume that traditional painting is similar –

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. DE FOREST: – but there is probably as much variety as contemporary art. Somebody sent me that magazine, Parkett –

MR. MATTESON: Oh, yes.

MR. DE FOREST: – and sometimes there are a couple of interesting things in it, but usually it could be just filled with photos of the artist. Artist deification seems to be a big thing.

MR. MATTESON: Self-identification, self-glorification.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes – a big thing. And I don't know if people should be interested in me personally.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. DE FOREST: You know, I'm not that interesting a person that it would do much for me.

MR. MATTESON: So you sort of think this is – a lot of it is narcissistic and –

MR. DE FOREST: Of course, of course. It's all narcissistic. I think I have alluded to this before: egotism is a trade – disease of artists.

MR. MATTESON: [Laughs.]

MR. DE FOREST: And if you think about it, I –

MR. MATTESON: I thought architects were the worst.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, there is a very strong tendency towards ultimate egotism and architecture, almost now to the extent that it has preempted the utilitarian –

MR. MATTESON: Oh, sure.

MR. DE FOREST: – issue in architecture that people like Mies van der Rohe and so forth – would use as kind of a basis for – you know, that a value, and that is gone. Frank Gebry [sic] – a lot of those buildings aren't very practical. They are basically big sculptures that he allows people into.

MR. MATTESON: Right, right. Well, you know, I talked to someone who worked at the High Museum in Atlanta that was done by Richard Meier who produced the Getty. They said they had the hardest time working with Meier just getting a building that would work with pictures.

MR. DE FOREST: Yes. It started with Frank Lloyd Wright and there's – with Frank Lloyd Wright started a very – a real antipathy towards other visual arts. He didn't like it very much and if he was going to build a building, he was going to make it as damn difficult to hang stuff in it as possible. The Guggenheim – that is a difficult place to hang –

MR. MATTESON: Sure is.

MR. DE FOREST: – and intentionally on his part. It is an interesting building, I certainly admit. And then you go to Gebry [sic] and he has really upped that several powers – you know, four squared.

There was this incident that occurred at a museum in Washington – this was reported in Time magazine. They had a relatively famous architect make a building for a kind of semi-local art association, and his building was so hard to use that they destroyed the art association.

MR. MATTESON: [Laughs.]

MR. DE FOREST: They wanted to use it to hang visiting shows and occasionally local people, and it became impossible to hang this stuff because it didn't function as a museum. So other than meeting in the place, and even that – it turned out to be highly impractical and destroyed the association, and they had trouble financing the building.

MR. MATTESON: [Laughs.]

Have you ever been to any of Louis Kahn's museums? There is one in Forth Worth and then the one in Yale University – British Centre.

MR. DE FOREST: I haven't been to either one of them –

MR. MATTESON: They are wonderful. They're very wonderful.

MR. DE FOREST: – but I have seen pictures at galleries.

MR. MATTESON: The lighting is superb. It's just beautiful stuff.

MR. DE FOREST: You know, in a sense, a gym is a better, you know – I don't remember if I have been at Forth Worth – oh, I have. I was in the museum – lots of paintings there. That is a very nice museum – very functional. It still looks nice; it still looks good. That is a relatively minor adjustment –

MR. MATTESON: Yes.

MR. DE FOREST: – in contemporary architects. Gehry, I think, has the major decision. And someone – the other way they can up is outdo Gehry, and that is going to be –

MR. MATTESON: You mentioned in our last talk how important Joan Brown was for you, her work. It was one of the few people that you had some kind of rapport with.

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, yeah, one of the people that I have rapport with. She is actually a very neat person, and since she was in the Bay area I knew her quite well when she was in art school, and very lively – a very lively person. Excellent painter –

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, yeah.

MR. DE FOREST: – really excellent, and did some similar paintings. We had kind of mutual ideas about how to go about it, I think.

And the other thing that was interesting – she sort of came out of a kind of abstract expressionism in the Bay area. At the time I had a similar idea about how to do that, as opposed to, you know, Mr. Diebenkorn – painter – and so forth.

MR. MATTESON: And went in another direction.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, Joan's and my direction was much similar.

MR. MATTESON: Did you find – who else went along with you in that time?

MR. DE FOREST: [Inaudible.] Wiley, to an extent, I think, even now, with this, with that. I didn't feel sympathetic to very figurative painting, although I liked them well enough, but – and I think maybe Joan wasn't too happy – as an ordeal, as a heart attack, even when I used figures, one of those figures, different than that.

MR. MATTESON: One of the other things that you mentioned last time – you said it in passing – I can almost quote it. You said, "Surrealism is everywhere." Surrealism –

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, it's a major – it's a major –

MR. MATTESON: How did it affect you?

MR. DE FOREST: I think surrealism – and even Mondrian says that it was a major movement. I remember a quote from him that he thought that it was a very important movement in modern art,

and that says a lot. And I kind of really believe it was the absolute major idea –

MR. MATTESON: What way for you?

MR. DE FOREST: Just as a model, the idea that if it was a chance meeting, incidental –

MR. MATTESON: Right, right.

MR. DE FOREST: – using things coming together, and it had kind of an artificial quality that I liked.

MR. MATTESON: You liked the artifice of it

MR. DE FOREST: Well, de Chirico.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. DE FOREST: I like those paintings of – he had those paintings of this guy walking down a very neat artificial lake –

MR. MATTESON: Right.

MR. DE FOREST: – and some other absurd things: all those train stations – enormous appeal. I think they're wonderful paintings. And I also like the fact that they're not painted very elaborately. They're very simple paintings materially. Technique didn't – it wasn't a heavy thing.

MR. MATTESON: That's right, that's right.

MR. DE FOREST: It was – sometimes it was very simple.

MR. MATTESON: Like your stuff – his work is a kind of – another reality altogether. It goes into something –

MR. DE FOREST: Yes, absolutely. It's Carlo Carrà. It's hard to dislike any of those people. It's a – valleys. They defined painting.

MR. MATTESON: So what I hear through all these conversations we've had is that the – your experience in the 1950s in the Bay area involves a combination of Beat stuff, your interest –there was this amazing interest with Surrealism in the '50s a lot. You were interested in accidental juxtaposition of elements like assemblage and so on and so forth. All that really had a very formative influence on subsequent work with you, even though yours becomes figurative, even though yours becomes narrative in some degree. But the – putting a kind of fantasy world in front of the viewer, or entering the fantasy world, the kind of "Alice in Wonderland" mentalities is still – that's part of your –

MR. DE FOREST: Sure. Absolutely. And all that sort of assemblage method, I did it, I did that – it wasn't really relayed as much to certain other forms of assemblage. A lot of that was found objects –

MR. MATTESON: Yes.

MR. DE FOREST: – a heavy emphasis on that, whereas in most cases I wasn't – although I used kitchen utensils I wasn't as interested in the found art.

MR. MATTESON: So you were interested in the actual making.

MR. DE FOREST: Making of stuff, and that – I'm an old model airplane builder and, you know, when I was a kid – Viking boats –

MR. MATTESON: Right.

MR. DE FOREST: My friend John Buck – [inaudible] – to building old things. He was very clever about –

MR. MATTESON: So coping saws are very important for you.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, that kind of thing. I had one. I didn't do much with it but John did. A jack knife – horn plugs, making –

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. DE FOREST: Viking boats with – I always wanted my – there was this glue called Iron Glue. I think it was just sort of – [inaudible] – but it was very strong, and I always wanted my parents to come back with a bottle of Iron Glue. I would use it up by gluing stuff together.

It's part of – that is an American tradition; that is building racecars and hotrods, and the whole series of American invention has gone by the boards now and it's simply –material. And computers and plastic models killed that whole thing off unfortunately.

I found as a teacher that you would find college students had very little skill with their hands – not that I have a lot, but they were extraordinarily clumsy just at putting things together because they always had these plastic engine parts. And they – and that used to be – in the '30s and '40s that's what kids did, make scooters and skis and sleds and sailboats and – you could go on forever. There used to be these books – I have a few of them – Popular Mechanics for Kids.

MR. MATTESON: I remember that magazine.

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, just fascinating.

MR. MATTESON: But it was all lost on me. I was all thumbs. My worst feeling in the world was woodshop.

MR. DE FOREST: Well, me too, in spite of the fact that – doing this doesn't necessarily mean I started out with any skill. One of my – one of the big things about my way of going about things is ingenuity in repairing screw-ups.

MR. MATTESON: [Laughs.]

MR. DE FOREST: And that is true about the painting. It's – skill, it's in repairing failures – concepts have failed.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, really?

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, yeah, and I did this. I started totally – [off mike]

MR. MATTESON: Well, it's like when you lose a mayonnaise, you are the one who is going to restore the mayonnaise when it's turned.

MR. DE FOREST: I don't – I seldom eat mayonnaise. Boy, it disgusts me, in fact, mayonnaise. I don't eat it.

MR. MATTESON: So how do you see yourself – you've reached a certain level of age and you look back on it, how do you think your career has come and do you see your art still continually becoming inventive as it all seems to be?

MR. DE FOREST: Well, as I look back – one personally has – whatever you call it for – it was so much more enormously successful than I ever really imagined.

MR. MATTESON: Is that so?

MR. DE FOREST: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Not that I am the great Roy Lichtenstein was, but considering – it's like going to Yakima J.C. and starting to paint. I was so just enormously successful, you know, able to show paintings in Paris and what have you, that I – when I was starting out I thought that if I ever did a painting that would appear in some book someplace I would be the cat's ankles. And sure enough, I have done that, so I consider myself successful, although in a larger way I was never Roy Lichtenstein or Frank Stella or what have you, for a number of reasons. I think I was too idiosyncratic and – sometimes– to ever do that. But in that sense I have been much more successful than I ever thought. On the other hand, looking at it – what one looks at is one's enormous stability.

MR. MATTESON: [Laughs.]

MR. DE FOREST: [Inaudible] – people – [Inaudible] – and I spend so much time doing things that it takes you so many years to see fatal mistakes you made. So those are the two components. They are quite at contrast to each other. So I'm getting old and so I guess I just sort of keep going, and my ambition is maybe to kind of lace together the parts of things I've got strewn about a little bit.

MR. MATTESON: But my impression, after looking at your work for a long time now, is that it has been a lot of fun.

MR. DE FOREST: Yeah, in the main, in the main, but it's also – you know, it's sort of tedious, and I think it should be. You know – give it – all art, if it wasn't interesting to people, they were really in bad shape. And that is not to say – oh, let's pick someone – Malone Dies [1951] – Waiting for Godot [1948.]

MR. MATTESON: Oh, Beckett? Samuel Beckett?

MR. DE FOREST: All that obviously has a pretty perverse message. On the other hand, it must have been some kind of macabre fun for him in some way even though his message was so bizarre.

MR. MATTESON: Bleak.

MR. DE FOREST: Bleak, yes. He is just that sort of person and there is part of it that must have been satisfying. I mean, there are a lot of artists like that. Certainly my tenor is not that – but Miró obviously is.

MR. MATTESON: But you know, in Miró for a while – there are some pictures that are very strong and grim that appeared in the '30s, he was going through some kind of nervous cycle – a nervous breakdown, and the pictures become very, very hard to look at, I think. And then on the other hand, there are these marvelous, glorious –

MR. DE FOREST: melting things –

MR. MATTESON: Yes – fabulous.

MR. DE FOREST: That's why you find still unfortunately kind of morbid parts of this that's sometimes hard for me to tolerate, and I think for a lot of other people now – I think he's [Clyfford Still] kind of fallen out of favor.

MR. MATTESON: I don't hear about him anymore.

MR. DE FOREST: Well, he hasn't – his wife I think is still living – has all these paintings that she is going to give to some town that the museum is dedicated to him, and there's not many takers.

MR. MATTESON: Well, Roy, I think we have had a long, long conversation –

[END TAPE 3, SIDE B]

[END OF INTERVIEW}

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