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Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Pat Steir, 2008
March 1-2

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a digitally recorded interview with Pat Steir on March 1 and 2, 2008. The interview took place at Steir's home in New York, N.Y., and was conducted by Judith Olch Richards for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Pat Steir and Judith Olch Richards 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

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Pat Steir on Saturday, March 1, 2008, at 80 McDougal Street, New York City, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disk number one.

So Pat, let's begin by talking about where you were born and your family, going through as slowly as you'd like, growing up, and what experiences you had that revealed your interest in art in some way. But first of all, start with where were you born.

PAT STEIR: I was born in a hospital in Newark, New Jersey, where my father grew up. My mother grew up at the beach in – what was it called – Long Beach. It's near Asbury Park, on the New Jersey shore. My father's family was a family of Russian Jews, two sides. Both sides of the family came here together at the beginning of the – 1920s – no –

MS. RICHARDS: Right after World War I?

MS. STEIR: No. Before World War I. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Where in Russia? Do you know?

MS. STEIR: I don't know. My grandfather said Moscow, but that was to be glamorous, because there were no Jewish people in Moscow – [laughs] – I'm told. When I was in Moscow, they said that the name was Ukrainian. The name of my father's family, last name, is Sukoneck, S-U-K-O-N-E-C-K.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay. Let me take that again. S-U –

MS. STEIR: S-U-K-O-N-E-C-K So they came from Russia. Where my mother came from is a little mysterious. She was mysterious. She was a Sephardic Jew. Her father, she said, came from Egypt through England. That makes sense. Her name was Kahl, K-A-H-L, or K-H-A-L, depending. And so he was Larry Sukoneck, and she was Judith Kahl. Her mother was born here, in Newark.

MS. RICHARDS: Your great – your grandmother?

MS. STEIR: My grandmother was born here. And my great-grandparents came to Newark and assimilated and settled in. And a lot of stories. It's hard to tell the – I don't know. It's hard to tell – the family stories – what's real and what isn't. When I was in Russia, they told me the name Sukoneck was Ukrainian, I think. I just saw my nephew, who did some research, and I think he – Ukraine. Where is Vija Celmins from? I think it's from that place.

MS. RICHARDS: Latvia?

MS. STEIR: Oh, no. It's not Latvian. It must be Ukrainian. I can't remember. Anyway, when I was in Russia, not only was it Ukrainian, but they said that the name was – the prefix was like Smith, it was so ordinary a name, though here there are few people with a similar name who are not relatives.

My father wanted to be an artist. He went to art school in Newark, at the art school in Newark where I had my first teaching job, coincidentally. He was like many friends we have. He had many jobs. Too many children too soon. He always – we never lived in Newark. We moved first, when I was small, to Irvington, New Jersey, and then to Maplewood, where – and then later to Livingston, and later to South Jersey near Philadelphia [PA]. So he moved around because he changed jobs a lot. He changed businesses. But he always had art-related businesses. He had a window display business. He had, my favorite, a silk-screening business, because I make silk screens with Dick Solomon. And whenever I go, you know, the printer picks me up, and we go in the car to Brooklyn [NY] to make our silk screens, and I always feel like a little girl going with Daddy to Brooklyn to make my silk screens. His business was in Newark.

But he had a window display business for the longest time. And then he lost that business, and he designed neon signs for the highway, the first, beginning factories that went out of - that were along the highways. And he designed - so that when I first - so between his window display business and the neon sign design business, when I saw Oldenburg, I thought, what's that so special about? Because my father, when he had the window display business, would have plaster ice cream sodas in the back seat, three-quarter figures of the president made of cardboard, you know, three-quarter size, an eighth of - you know, a quarter of an inch thick with a photo of the president on it or a photo of the person selling Diet Coke. They didn't have Diet Coke then, but whatever he was. And so he would get a contract with a company to put the displays in their windows. So he had a warehouse filled with these things. He had a doll you could plug in advertising Dolly Madison ice cream. They would plug it in, put it in the window, and it would bow.

MS. RICHARDS: Too bad you don't have that now.

MS. STEIR: No. Well, any of that stuff. But when I was a little girl, I could fit into Dolly Madison's dress, so that was fun.

He was sad. He wanted to be an artist. And he would - only lately - I'm a good friend with Kiki Smith, and only lately my father would point down the road and say, "Well, I can't make it. That man down the road is a great artist." It must have been Kiki Smith's father, because that was the road. [Laughs.] The big road led from Maplewood to South Orange to East Orange, where they lived. And it must have been Tony Smith. I can't think of another person who lived there it could have been.

MS. RICHARDS: George Segal?

MS. STEIR: No. He lived down the shore. He lived in another part of New Jersey that we moved to later, which is near Philadelphia. And I always say I grew up in Philadelphia, but it's really - Philadelphia was the city, 20 minutes away. So that was my father.

I knew I wanted - I was the class poet when I was five years old. I always knew I wanted to be an artist, or I always felt I was a poet and an artist.

MS. RICHARDS: And obviously, your father encouraged you?

MS. STEIR: No. He discouraged me. He didn't -

MS. RICHARDS: And your mother?

MS. STEIR: She was neutral, but not encouraging.

MS. RICHARDS: You have brothers and sisters?

MS. STEIR: I have a brother three years younger, a sister who died [as an adult], who was four years younger.

MS. RICHARDS: So you were the oldest?

MS. STEIR: And a sister who was 14 years younger, all with the same mother and father.

MS. RICHARDS: So you're the oldest?

MS. STEIR: I'm the oldest. A lot of artists are the oldest. [Laughs.] So I grew up; I was an academic girl. I was good at academics. I read, lived in a world of children's fiction and soon regular fiction, and after that I discovered erotic literature - [laughs] - but all before - by the time I was 12, before 12.

MS. RICHARDS: And were you also the class artist?

MS. STEIR: No. I was not the class artist. In grade school -

MS. RICHARDS: You say that as if maybe there was competition.

MS. STEIR: Well, I'll tell you something. In grade school, I was the class artist. In high school, I was not the class artist, but the class artist was a whole different kind of person, because [she was] the head majorette, too. [Laughs.] And last year we had a class reunion, which I couldn't go to because I had a show out of town. But we had to send a - we had to write something about our life. And I didn't have time to do that, either, so I sent them my bio and biblio. And the class artist/drum majorette worked at a publishing house now, and she had to edit it. I was, 50 years later, happy. [They laugh.]

MS. RICHARDS: In your high school, was art taken seriously, or was it like shop?

MS. STEIR: No. It wasn't taken seriously. The boys in the back of the room threw clay to see who could get it to stick to the ceiling the longest. I had - so we lived in a small town in New Jersey, even though it was near Philadelphia. I would leave school, or never arrive, and go and look at - go to the Philadelphia Museum [Philadelphia Museum of Art, PA]. I did it so often, sitting on the floor, spreading my books out on the floor, looking at the artwork, eating apples, that after a while the guards didn't even chase me away. They just said, there's that kid again. And recently I went to the - I did a - well, maybe five years ago - a lecture at the Philadelphia Museum. And after the lecture, [director] Ann d'Harnoncourt took me through the museum in the dark, at night in the evening, and showed me the way she had changed the museum, how it changed and how a beautiful [Jan] van Eyck painting, she had it restored. It had blue painted over the gold, and she - and it was so touching to me; I was a teenager again, you know?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. STEIR: So touching that she took the care to do that. Maybe I told her my story, or a friend who knew my story of that museum -

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: Because it was a big museum. It's a lot of work to take somebody through there.

MS. RICHARDS: Did she mention that your story is still repeated; there are still high school students who -

MS. STEIR: No. She didn't say that. I was talking all the time. I didn't give her a chance. I was like, you know, speeding, so happy to be eight years old, back in that museum. My father took me to museums.

MS. RICHARDS: In Philadelphia?

MS. STEIR: And here. The Modern Art [Museum of Modern Art, New York City], and I guess the Newark Museum was the first museum, and then -

MS. RICHARDS: Was there any art in your house?

MS. STEIR: None. Only the art I made, or my father painted little paintings, but he didn't take them seriously. They didn't hang in the house. Oh, I guess there were prints and pictures. I mean, there weren't bare walls. There was something, but not art art.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. STEIR: Prints. Reproductions.

MS. RICHARDS: And what about your brothers and sisters? Did they have any interest in art?

MS. STEIR: The sister, who died, Karen, was a designer.

MS. RICHARDS: A graphic designer?

MS. STEIR: Graphic designer. And my brother always wanted to be a writer, and he wrote good poetry when he was young, but he became a psychiatrist instead. [Laughs.] The opposite, really, of that poetry, I think.

MS. RICHARDS: So what - in high school, did you know that you wanted to study art after high school?

MS. STEIR: I absolutely wanted desperately to study art. My parents didn't have much money. I was booked with a scholarship to go to Smith College [Northampton, MA]. A girl came to talk to us - and be an English major, because I was a good student, so - and the English teacher - nobody in my school respected art except the head of the school, the principal. Public school. And he was my ally, really. So anyway, a girl came, and she had on a blue angora sweater and pearls and a short haircut, and she told me I could take art history as a minor but not art. Maybe.

MS. RICHARDS: At Smith?

MS. STEIR: At Smith. A few art courses, but I was going to go into the English department, you know, freshman, and then - and she left, and I was hysterical. It was already June. You know, she came to welcome me. Graduation was a minute away. And I got into my mother's car, and I drove to the next town. The high school was in the next town, and the principal lived in the next town. And I drove into the side of his car as he was pulling out the driveway in the evening.

And he was really a nice man. He said, "What's wrong?" I told him what's wrong. "I really want to go to art

school, but I have this scholarship. My parents don't have much money. What can I do?" He had a big base fiddle in the back, you know, a big bass – not a fiddle, a cello – in the back of his car and was sitting with another man. And he said, "I'm on my way to Brooklyn to Pratt Institute. I play in a chamber music group there every" – you know, whatever – Thursday or whatever day it was. "And I will speak to someone for you." How's that? And he did, and a test came in the mail. I took the test. I went with my father for an interview.

My father was not happy about it. It's hard to say that about your father. He was jealous about the chance, you know. He never grew up. My parents were always babies. They never grew up. We sat there, and I was interviewed by a wonderful man named Fritz Eichenberg. And he said, "You're in." He had to say "You're in" or "You're out" because it was June. "You're in." I got scholarships. I got jobs. And I rarely saw my parents again after that. When I – after I had been in school for two years –

MS. RICHARDS: We can go back to that. But who you studied with, if you remember –

MS. STEIR: At Pratt, I studied with [Adolph] Gottlieb and Richard Lindner. And it still shows in my work, both of them. [Laughs.]

They gave me an honorary Ph.D. in 1991, and I asked for Roger Crossgrove to – they said, you can have anybody introduce me. But, of course, Eichenberg was not alive. So I asked for Roger Crossgrove, who I knew from then. And he came. He was so happy; he couldn't believe that I remembered him or asked him. And so he introduced me. So that was nice.

MS. RICHARDS: So when you were at Pratt those first two years, were you in the painting division?

MS. STEIR: They had no painting division. It was graphic arts and illustration. After two years in school, I got panicked. I was really working a lot of jobs to be in school. I was –

MS. RICHARDS: Even though you had the scholarship, you still had to –

MS. STEIR: It didn't pay for everything.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] Were you living in Brooklyn near Pratt?

MS. STEIR: Yeah. I was living first – when I first went, you had to live in a dormitory. And then in the second year, I lived in a group house.

MS. RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MS. STEIR: And then –

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember the name of the street you lived on?

MS. STEIR: Yeah. A big street. I think it was Clinton [Avenue].

MS. RICHARDS: Okay.

MS. STEIR: A big street with big mansions. We lived in a big mansion, all these girls. And then you sort of had to earn your way a little bit, so it was cheaper. I got more money. Fritz Eichenberg – my father couldn't send me any money. He was completely broken down, had a kind of nervous breakdown – not kind of; I guess he had a nervous breakdown. He didn't send me any money.

I was working for a designer on 68th Street who made needlepoint carpets. She designed them, very ordinary designs, you know, people playing tennis or girls playing croquet, lawns and little flowers, or all flowers. And all I had to do was sit in this beautiful window and trace her design. But that wasn't enough money. So I modeled in the garment district.

I was, at that time – I'm the shortest person in my elevator, my studio elevator. But at that time, I was just, like, tall-medium. I didn't shrink; they got bigger. So I was able to model junior size clothes in the garment district. But I was very clumsy, so every job lasted for about a week – [laughs] – and then they said no. You know, I would open the coat without opening the buttons, and – it's when they had all the buyers were men, you know. And you'd come, and all the – a lot manufacturing was here. It was tricky. The other models, they were a lot like hookers, I have to say. They were a little bit – but they were nice, you know, because I didn't know how to put on makeup or anything. And I still don't. So they would put makeup on. They were very helpful, nice women, nice young women, in that way.

MS. RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MS. STEIR: So I did that. I designed the thing. Although my father was not successful, part of it was that he had terrifically difficult rules for himself that he – he wasn't tough at all. He was too liberal, but – with his – he was too inattentive. But –

MS. RICHARDS: So you were at Pratt. You started – what year was it that you started?

MS. STEIR: Fifty-six. So I went to Pratt for two years, and then it was very hard. Fritz Eichenberg went to a publisher named – Holiday House was the name of the publisher. And he explained about this girl who was having such a hard time staying in school, but was a good student. And that man gave me a scholarship, which meant more money. I didn't have to work so much. And so I got a job in the library, school library, which was – then I could do homework sitting there – in the evenings, so nobody came. And I didn't have to –

MS. RICHARDS: The Pratt library.

MS. STEIR: The Pratt library.

MS. RICHARDS: So I didn't have to do anything but check out books. But, you know, I didn't know any library systems. But nobody came, so I could read and study and draw in my notebook. And then I had this – I had, you know, several small scholarships to go. I got panicked, and I got married to my high school best friend – really, not a sweetheart, not somebody I loved; I just married him, Mr. Steir. And he was going to Harvard [University, Cambridge, MA].

MS. RICHARDS: When was that?

MS. STEIR: Fifty-eight.

MS. RICHARDS: So he was going to school in –

MS. STEIR: In Boston.

MS. RICHARDS: But you kept in touch?

MS. STEIR: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Kept a romance of some sort going?

MS. STEIR: A friendship. I guess he had a romance, and I had a friendship. Anyway, he said, "Let's get married," and I thought, why not? Get away from my family. I had a very inattentive family. They didn't pay too much attention. But –

MS. RICHARDS: This would have caused them to pay attention.

MS. STEIR: [Laughs] But no. But my father had his rules, so I couldn't just live with a boyfriend. It was too early. That didn't happen. People didn't do that then. So I got married and moved to Boston. Enrolled in the Boston Museum School [School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA], where I had a scholarship. I didn't like it. Signed up for BU [Boston University, MA]. Went there, 50 years ago in 1958. I remind Brice [Marden] that we've known each other for 50 years. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: It's always hard.

MS. STEIR: Yeah. We've been friends for 50 years. But we don't always – sometimes we see each other every vacation and holiday and weekends, and then we go for years where we barely see each other. That's the only way you could stay friends for that long. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: True.

MS. STEIR: So some years we don't see each other.

MS. RICHARDS: So how did you find the art department at BU?

MS. STEIR: I went into the art department at BU. And there was a teacher there – well, there were a lot of people there that I don't know anymore. But there was a teacher there named Stanton Kaye who taught us about materials.

MS. RICHARDS: Painting materials?

MS. STEIR: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Encaustic, gloss, oil?

MS. STEIR: Everything. [Laughs.] But really about gold leafing and encaustic, mixing.

MS. RICHARDS: Egg tempera?

MS. STEIR: Everything, but really how to do it, how do to it. It's funny, because Carol Mancusi [ph] and Geroll [ph] recently interviewed me about the materials, how I paint, physically how I paint when I do it. She said it looks so mysterious when you look at my paintings. How does she do that? But actually, I just use very classic methods learned from Stanton Kaye. [Laughs.] And some I invent on that, but not mysterious.

And we had, next door to that, the Boston Museum [of Fine Arts], or next door to where I lived was the Boston Museum. And I - there they had one - had and have one of the major Asian art collections in this country. That's where I first saw Asian art. And although it just got mentioned in my work by writers, when I started to pour the paint, you can see it. You can see the influence of Chinese painting through the earliest work, or at -

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you - we can go back for a moment to Pratt. When you were a student those two years -

MS. STEIR: Oh, after -

MS. RICHARDS: - did you feel that you were struggling the whole time to find your voice? Did you feel that it was just a period of learning? Or were you frustrated, or were you excited that you felt like you knew what your vision would be as an artist? What was your state of mind as a budding artist at Pratt?

MS. STEIR: I wanted to be the best. [Laughs.] That was my state of mind. But a lot of the things they taught were - they had a lot of - they had old Bauhaus people teaching there, too, the wives, Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, another woman who was very good whose name I can't remember.

MS. RICHARDS: This is at Pratt?

MS. STEIR: At Pratt. But, you know, they said, oh, well, you can't - don't ever put anything in the center of the - like that. They had rules that they took from the Bauhaus. It doesn't seem likely the Bauhaus because of [Josef] Albers. But anyway, they had rules, and I resisted. But I didn't resist loudly. I resisted privately in my work. It was a school for illustrators and graphic designers.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that why they didn't have a department to put painting in?

MS. STEIR: They taught painting. Lindner taught painting - and Mercedes Matter taught painting. And she was really wild. You know, she would tell you about all her lovers. [Laughs.] And that was wild to a young girl in the '50s.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you - that reminds me. So while you were at Pratt, did you go into Manhattan, and did you meet any of the New York school painters then?

MS. STEIR: No. I was shy. I was very shy. No, I didn't - like, I went with a boy from my home town who looked like he would be a superstar artist, but that never happened. He was quite a bit older than me, and he was already living in Brooklyn as an artist. And he took me to the Cedar Bar one night. And he came out of the bathroom very excited. He said, "Guess who I peed next to? Franz Kline." [Laughs.] That's as close as I got.

MS. RICHARDS: Anyway, going back to Pratt, you said that you wanted to be the best, but the emphasis was on graphic design and illustration.

MS. STEIR: And illustration. I could draw, but I was never a good illustrator because I couldn't follow instructions. When I went to Boston, I stayed for two years, and then I said - then everybody in my class graduated. So I had two years at Pratt, two years at Boston, and no degree. So I went back to Pratt.

MS. RICHARDS: Because they didn't count your time at Pratt toward the BU degree?

MS. STEIR: Yeah. But I went back to Pratt. Fritz Eichenberg was still there, still liked me, still - I explained to him, "I have no degree. Can I use the credits from BU?" He said, "Yes, but you have to do six more months." So I did. And I sort of lost my husband. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: He was still in school in Boston?

MS. STEIR: Yes. He was just about to graduate. And then they built the Berlin Wall, and he got drafted. Oh, no. I sort of lost him, but then he got stationed in Atlanta, Georgia - in Augusta, Georgia. And I went there. So I did

the six months at -

MS. RICHARDS: Fort Gordon?

MS. STEIR: I guess. Really. Really. And, you know, it was during the civil - big civil rights demonstrations there, and I -

MS. RICHARDS: So you said to your husband, who was in Boston, I'm going back to Pratt. You finish your year of school in Boston. I'll be in Brooklyn.

MS. STEIR: [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: But when he finished school, he got drafted?

MS. STEIR: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And sent to Augusta?

MS. STEIR: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: And you were meanwhile in -

MS. STEIR: In Brooklyn. So I went to see him in Augusta. Stayed for a few months. I hated it.

MS. RICHARDS: So he was drafted? He hadn't been in ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps]?

MS. STEIR: Yeah. He was drafted with the - maybe he'd been in ROTC, but I don't think so. I think he was drafted, plain-out drafted, because they built the Berlin Wall, and there was that scare.

MS. RICHARDS: This was 1960-something?

MS. STEIR: Sixty-one or -two. Sixty-two, maybe.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MS. STEIR: It must have been '62, because I had by then done all my school, or '61. But I was there. It was interesting because he - because of the Civil Rights Movement, started there. So I go and -

MS. RICHARDS: So you finished Pratt, and you went to Augusta to be with him?

MS. STEIR: Yeah. But I - anyway, it was interesting because it was - the Civil Rights Movement was there. Then he got transferred to - really interesting, because the first demonstrations were in Augusta. Big demonstrations were in Augusta. It was very interesting. -

Then we went to Atlanta - and there was a young man raising money for civil rights for voter registration. He and his sister were selling newspapers. Right across the street from where we lived, they had a little office. And I went to him, and I said, I would like to - his name was Julian Bond. I thought he would be president one day. I said, "I'd like to work for you. I'd like to go out in the field." He said, "We don't send" - it was very early. He was still organizing. And he said, "We don't send white people out in the field. It's too dangerous. But you can raise money for us."

Now, I knew, you know, many African Americans from school and from Harvard. And some of their families lived there. And I remember going to one family whose son had been a friend of mine. Maybe I knew him from Pratt. They were the - there were two hills, the rich white hill and the rich black hill. They lived on the rich black hill. I went there, trying to - I had so many - I never raised a penny. I had doors slammed in my face. Some friend of my husband's wife asked for me to return all her *National Geographics*. -

The grandmother of my black friend explained to me why she wasn't going to give me any money. Because all of - because the insurance companies and the banks wouldn't deal with black people, wouldn't give loans to black people or insure them, there were mirror-image black insurance companies and banks, black-owned banks and insurance. So there was big business on the other side of the tracks. And if she gave me money for equality, that would be taking pennies out of her pocket. She was very nice. She gave me tea. She gave me cookies. She offered me lunch. And she was very sweet. And she would have talked to me all day if I wanted to. But she wouldn't give me a penny. And so that was sort of - then I went back to New York, and that was the end of it. I got an apartment of my own.

MS. RICHARDS: And so your husband was - you came back to New York. Your husband was still in Atlanta?

MS. STEIR: He was in Atlanta.

MS. RICHARDS: Continuing in the military service?

MS. STEIR: Service. He was - he became a Boy - his service was to be a Boy Scout leader for the officers' boys - [laughs] - in Atlanta.

MS. RICHARDS: He had finished his degree, though?

MS. STEIR: Yeah. He had finished Harvard Business School [Boston, MA], in fact.

MS. RICHARDS: So you decided you wanted to come to New York and -

MS. STEIR: And be an artist and not fool around with him and his family anymore.

MS. RICHARDS: What was his first name?

MS. STEIR: Merle. Merle Steir. He died -

MS. RICHARDS: M-E-R-

MS. STEIR: - L-E Steir, S-T-E-I-R, my name.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: I kept the name. I loved it. Pat Steir. It sounds like Roy Rogers's best friend, doesn't it?

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

[They laugh.]

MS. RICHARDS: When you came to New York, how was that? Did you have connections? Did you have friends from Pratt?

MS. STEIR: I had friends from Pratt. Friends from BU here. Yes. And then New York was an amazing scene in the early '60s.

MS. RICHARDS: And did you see yourself as a painter then or -

MS. STEIR: Yes. Oh, no. Yes and no. I came back, and I had no money, so I tried to be an illustrator. But I was painting, but I illustrated for, you know, Doubleday and Harper & Row. But I didn't like it because I didn't like being an illustrator. And I wasn't good at it because I didn't like it. When the art director at Harper & Row quit her job, which was, like, 1964, she said, "Would you like this job?" And I said, "I'd love it." So the publisher, Cass Canfield, interviewed me, and he gave me the job.

MS. RICHARDS: Cass, C-A-S-S?

MS. STEIR: Canfield. An amazing -

MS. RICHARDS: Canfield?

MS. STEIR: Yeah, F-E-I-L-D, yeah, I think. And he was the publisher. And his son, Cass, Jr. - [laughs] - became my boss. And I was the art director - not of children's books - but of -

MS. RICHARDS: Was that a full-time, nine-to-five job?

MS. STEIR: It was. Now, I went - first of all, they were just extraordinary. You know, their mother had been a suffragette - and it's a very - it's a renowned, powerful American family, publishing family. Somehow, Charlie Cowles is related to them, Cowles Publisher. Later I met a friend called Sage Cowles, from Minneapolis, a big supporter of the Minneapolis Museum [Minneapolis Institute of Arts, MN]. She was a ballerina. It's an interesting family.

First of all, when they hired me, they gave me a salary. I said "Yes." I walked around the corner, went into a Schrafft's store and called back, and he got on the phone, and I said, "I need more money." He said, "How much?" I said, "Okay." So I worked there for maybe - after I worked there for a year or six months -

MS. RICHARDS: This is in 1962?

MS. STEIR: I think by then it was '63 or '64 – but I'm not sure. I'm very bad on dates. And if you look at my bio, all the dates are different. But it was around then.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: Probably. After I worked there for a while, I said, "If I do this job in three days, and you let me stay in the building" – because it was still small, like a double-size townhouse on 33rd Street – "If you let me stay in the building late, if I can stay in the building late," and other people worked late so, "can I work three days, do the whole job, and get the same salary?" He said, "Yes."

[They laugh.]

Isn't that amazing?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. But it shows you had such confidence to ask him that.

MS. STEIR: I had so much confidence when I was young, it was amazing. I'm much less confident as the world –

MS. RICHARDS: And as a young woman, being confident was extraordinary, too, and being able to ask for more money and ask for this position.

MS. STEIR: Then I could do anything – because I had no room for ambivalence. I left my husband. I didn't try to take alimony, which was the style of the day. I didn't – I left, and I was going to prove myself. I had no room for ambivalence. And life has, you know, beaten me around a little bit now, and I'm much less confident than I was then, much less outspoken. Because every time I was outspoken, so – but I learned that you get your tongue cut off. But I have a friend who said, "Grow up, Pat." [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Where were you living when you first moved to New York?

MS. STEIR: Back to New York? On East Sixth Street.

MS. RICHARDS: East Sixth?

MS. STEIR: And Second Avenue, between First and Second.

MS. RICHARDS: East Village?

MS. STEIR: High-rent district now, but then it wasn't. [Laughs.] You know, with an apartment that seemed pathetically –

MS. RICHARDS: A cold-water flat, or something better?

MS. STEIR: No. It had "bath in kitch." [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: The bathtub was in the kitchen?

MS. STEIR: Yeah, you know, and the bedroom was there, and the kitchen. But I had what would now cost \$3-, \$4,000 for \$90, walk up a flight of stairs. It had – it wasn't as big as this floor, but it was a floor.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MS. STEIR: And it had – so it had a living/bedroom. Then it had the kitchen with the bathtub, and an opening in the wall. So I had a friend who used to come over for a bath, and liked to take his bath while I was asleep so he could sit parallel to me in the bathtub – [laughs] –like people on a journey or something. But on the other side of the beautiful kitchen, big kitchen with a bathtub, was a small room that could have been a bedroom. But I had an aversion to that room. I didn't use it. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to say, was that your studio?

MS. STEIR: No. I worked in the room that I slept in, the big room where I slept, entertained, and kept my dog, and in the kitchen. So I worked all over. But the small room was very small. By today's standards, it would be a bedroom, you know. It would be considered a whole room. I used it as a closet and a storage. And then on the other side of that was a toilet. So the building narrowed down toward the back, so the big room, and then it got narrower.

MS. RICHARDS: And how long did you live there?

MS. STEIR: Oh, for a few years. And my sister came to New York, and she moved on East Fourth Street. And she

was – had gone to school, I think, with Barbara Kruger, and they were very funny. Evenings with them were very funny.

MS. RICHARDS: Your sister was also a young professional in the city?

MS. STEIR: Trying. Trying. When I quit my job at Harper & Row, I gave it to my sister, and they let me do that, too. We looked similar. Maybe they didn't – nobody actually noticed the difference.

[They laugh.]

So that was that. And then I met – I had friends from Pratt and from Boston.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you recall, as a student, what artists were influential for you? I mean, we can go after student [years], but I forgot to ask you that. As a student, what artists or period of art was influential? Did you have pictures up on your studio wall, posters, postcards?

MS. STEIR: I did.

MS. RICHARDS: What was that?

MS. STEIR: I love Man Ray. I love Marcel Duchamp.

MS. RICHARDS: That was very advanced.

MS. STEIR: Well, it was. And it's interesting that I stayed a painter through all that. It's curious. Like I kept thinking there was something to do, more, in painting. Of course –

MS. RICHARDS: How do you explain that you – the first people you think of is Man Ray and Duchamp now?

MS. STEIR: But Man Ray painting. Man Ray painting. *The Bride [The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even, Marcel Duchamp, 1915-23]* and –

MS. RICHARDS: And where did that come from? Did you have other friends who were interested? Teachers who were interested?

MS. STEIR: No. Duchamp at the Philadelphia Museum, and the mystery of the broken glass [*The Large Glass, 1915-23*], which I realize now happened in transit. But anyway –

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: – I didn't know that then. It was mysterious, like a painting to me. So it wasn't really advanced. I'd been going to museums since I was small, and the Man Ray painting – what is it, the dancer walking the tightrope [*The Tightrope Walker, 1918?*]; [Paul] Cézanne, that beautiful Cézanne; there's a painting. There was a painting that made me become a painter. My father used to get me Skira books, you know, and they would be all orange or all green, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: The little square ones?

MS. STEIR: Yeah, the color was so bad, and it wasn't calibrated properly.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. STEIR: So I thought, to make a painting, you had to make it all orange or all green – [laughs] – you know, glaze it with orange or green.

When I was a very small girl, my father took me to the – I was 11 – took me to the Museum of Modern Art [New York City], where I saw a painting of a farm boy, by Cézanne, standing in a doorway, I think. It's probably – it's still there, I'm sure. And he was standing sideways so the back arm looked very short. It was like a human effort at perspective. And when I saw it, I said, "So that's what art is. I can do that."

Painting, for me, has always been the greatest pleasure and the greatest scary thing to do. And the less – the more out painting seems in the world, the more in it is with me.

Later, I met [Mark] Rothko. I was good friends with the [Jack] Tworokov daughters, Helen and Hermione, but especially with Helen. And so I would go with a boyfriend and spend summers there in their apartment over their garage, which – and Jack would get up every morning, put on his little paint suit, and go back into his barn back there and paint. And at night, he would come out with a few little smears on him, and take off his paint suit and have dinner. He was very spiffy, clean. And, but one evening they had a party –

MS. RICHARDS: This was –

MS. STEIR: In the '60s.

MS. RICHARDS: Was this when you were an adult, after school, living in New York?

MS. STEIR: Yes. But just then.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MS. STEIR: Right away. I had a boyfriend who had gone to Pratt with Bob Moskowitz, married to Hermione Tworkov. And so that's how I met them. I don't see Hermione and Bob so much, but Helen is a lifelong friend. I see her all the time.

So it was just after school, after leaving Merle Steir. We were invited there on the basis of – Bob and Hermione were already together. I don't know if they were married yet, but they were together, probably married. And so we were invited there on the basis of their friendship. But then I became friends with the family. Jack had a – Jack and his wife, Wally, whose real name was not Walter.

[They laugh.]

MS. RICHARDS: Did she spell it W-A-L-L-Y?

MS. STEIR: I think so.

MS. RICHARDS: She went by Wally Tworkov?

MS. STEIR: Yeah, yeah – had parties, you know, and people that, well, as a young woman I thought were like –

MS. RICHARDS: In the East Village also?

MS. STEIR: No. On Cape Cod [MA]. I'm sorry. We'd spend summers there with them on Cape Cod, or a month, or a few weeks.

MS. RICHARDS: Was the Provincetown painting workshop active? Had it begun by then?

MS. STEIR: I'm not sure. I don't know. But Rothko was there, the last summer of his life. What year was that? That was later, maybe '68.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: Probably even later, maybe. He was there the last year of his life, and I admired his work so much. Still do. And I said, "Mr. Rothko, I love your paintings." And he said, "You're a pretty girl. How come you're not married?" [Laughs.] I had better luck because I said the same thing to [Willem] de Kooning, and he said, "Oh, thank you so much. Nobody ever talks about my work with me anymore."

[They laugh.]

You know, they were afraid to. But I was a kid, so it was okay.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. That comment reminds me, I want to also go back to the college years and after. How was being a woman aspiring to be an artist, both at art school and later – what was that experience?

MS. STEIR: Very negative. [Laughs.] Very, very negative.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you feel – were there other women who you felt camaraderie with and that you could struggle together to –

MS. STEIR: Later. Later. In the late '60s, yes, there were.

MS. RICHARDS: But in art school?

MS. STEIR: In art school, there was one woman who I was friends with. But she had a difficult personality.

You got sort of a pat on the head. I remember there was one teacher, who has died since, who was so dismissive of me. It was so painful. Painfully dismissive, like you pat the dog when it does a good trick. And I hated him. Years later – he was still teaching at Pratt; not anymore, he's gone, but I would say in the late '70s – in the early '70s, with that women's movement, was my first exposure. And it was good, you know. I was one of those baby

girl stars.

So he brought his class to my studio. It was so sad. By then I didn't hate him. He left, and I cried. I said, "Oh, no, he's still teaching. And now he looks up to me." It was very hard. And I think -

MS. RICHARDS: But yet you did get scholarships, and you did have people who supported you.

MS. STEIR: Fritz Eichenberg. Fritz Eichenberg.

MS. RICHARDS: Which, we've all heard stories about girls not even getting scholarships.

MS. STEIR: Fritz Eichenberg was incredibly supportive, always.

MS. RICHARDS: And when you graduated, it sounds like you had the attitude that you were going to succeed. You might have to support yourself in other ways, but you were going to be an artist, a painter.

MS. STEIR: Absolutely. It's been a long journey, with many ups and downs.

MS. RICHARDS: When you came to New York in the early '60s, or in the mid-'60s and you started working, painting as well as the work at the publisher, were there other women you were friends with who you could feel - you supported each other against all this - all the -

MS. STEIR: Not while I was working at Harper & Row. When I quit Harper & Row, I knew Diane Arbus. When Diane Arbus quit her job at Parsons [now Parsons The New School for Design, New York City], she recommended that I have the job. She knew that I didn't like being an art director. I loved it, but it was - you know, I thought, if I teach, I can make some money. She recommended me for that job. When I had that job, I met a photographer who -

MS. RICHARDS: Teaching at Parsons?

MS. STEIR: At Parsons.

MS. RICHARDS: On Fifth Avenue?

MS. STEIR: Was it on Fifth Avenue then?

MS. RICHARDS: I don't know.

MS. STEIR: I don't remember where it was. Yeah, I guess it was on Fifth Avenue. Anyway, I could walk to work. I think they had an art school uptown in the '50s, as I recall, because I can remember being up there, but -

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MS. STEIR: Studio space. Or the 60s, very far east. -Teaching there was a photographer named Larry Fink, and he was married to Joan Snyder. And he said, "I saw your paintings, and you and my wife have a lot in common." I'll say. [Laughs.] We sure did. I mean, we were both dedicated to the brush mark. So we had - I made friends with her.

Then I was at a party at Bob Moskowitz's, and I met Marcia Tucker. That was it. I had paintings in my studio, and Marcia came. There was this girl, black, very black, wild hair. And she had a little crowd of people. She was about 27 years old, 28, maybe, so a girl my age. A crowd of people, and she was talking. They were laughing and listening. And I went and sat and listened to her, and somebody said [whispering], "She's a curator at the Whitney [Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City]." And I invited her to come see my work. And she did. And she said, "I love this work." I said, "Thank you, thank you." She said, "Oh, that's not enough. I have to do something about it." And she introduced - she brought the work -

MS. RICHARDS: What year was this? Do you know?

MS. STEIR: I think it was '71.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, okay.

MS. STEIR: She brought the - it was - and they were the first paintings I had done. I had three, four paintings. I don't have a book here, but it's called -

MS. RICHARDS: The paintings with the roses?

MS. STEIR: Oh, long before that. *Looking for the Mountain* [1971]. *The Way to New Jersey* [date?]. She put it in

the Whitney Annual. It was the Annual then.

MS. RICHARDS: Painting Annual? They alternated between painting and sculpture?

MS. STEIR: I don't remember. But I guess it was painting. When the Annual was written about, the writer, who so long ago was the reviewer, the head reviewer for the [*New York Times*], only wrote about that painting. And Flora Biddle, who I met through Marcia and still friends with, put up the money or voted for it. They got it. I guess - they bought the painting, and it's still there. They've only hung it once in 30 years, but it's there. A few years ago they hung it because it suddenly dawned on them that it looked like a postmodern painting. Because it had a - I'm sure you've seen that work. Long before the roses.

MS. RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] I was thinking of the roses because of the painting in "High Times, Hard Times" ["High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-1975." Traveling exhibition organized by Independent Curators International, 2006-07] which is an early '70s [inaudible].

MS. STEIR: Yeah. That's a year later, two years later. Two years later. But the other ones were more dispersed, and they had poetry written on them. They had writing on them. I was still between should I be a poet or not. I mean, should I be a poet? And through Marcia and Joan, who were friends, it turned out, I met a whole gang of other women artists. And in the '70s, all - the '70s looked at women artists.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. Yes. Were you represented by a gallery in the '70s, at the time of your work being in the Whitney?

MS. STEIR: Not yet. But then Marcia showed it to a gallery named Paley and Lowe [New York City], and I had a group show there with Joan Snyder and Mary Heilmann. And then I had my own show, and then I worked with them. Then they went out of business, and I started to work with Xavier Fourcade. But that was later in the '70s.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] So at that point, when you made that painting that was in the Whitney, who would you say your artistic influences were, or your other influences?

MS. STEIR: Nobody. I was coming from nowhere. But it looked like that time. I mean, that's the mystery of art, that it - whether the art is good or bad, it always reflects its time.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MS. STEIR: And it's hard to -

MS. RICHARDS: So you weren't consciously or unconsciously looking at Man Ray or Duchamp and -

MS. STEIR: No. But that was all part of me.

MS. RICHARDS: Or Cézanne.

MS. STEIR: I hadn't - you can see a lot of [Robert] Rauschenberg in that work, but I wasn't conscious - in other words, I had assimilated my time.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MS. STEIR: And it was in that work.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Other Pop artists.

MS. STEIR: It wasn't Pop art at all, even though you see Rauschenberg. It wasn't at all Pop art. I wish I had a picture. I do. I have my computer upstairs. Maybe I have a picture to show you.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay. When -

MS. STEIR: When you see it, you're going to know it, and not know it was mine.

MS. RICHARDS: When the Whitney had "American Century" -

MS. STEIR: The one - they own a painting from the next two years later that they do exhibit a lot called *Line Lima* [1973]. It's similar to the one in "High Times, Hard Times."

MS. RICHARDS: Oh. Yes.

MS. STEIR: And that's two years later than these first paintings.

MS. RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] So at that point in the '70s, in the early '70s, were you still living on East Sixth Street?

MS. STEIR: No. I had a loft on Wooster Street. I was living on Wooster Street.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, the loft that you -

MS. STEIR: No, not on Wooster Street. On Mulberry Street.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, okay. Not the loft you eventually went to, then?

MS. STEIR: No. No.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: I was living on Mulberry Street. I lived there for 22 years. The loft I eventually went to, and then sold immediately, practically, because it had no air, was on Wooster Street. But on Mulberry Street, I lived from 1964. Right after the Lower East Side, I went to Mulberry Street and got a loft.

MS. RICHARDS: That was adjacent to SoHo. So you were basically in SoHo in the early years when there wasn't -

MS. STEIR: There was no SoHo. There was no SoHo. You could walk your dog naked and nobody was there to see you - [laughs] - no police to stop you.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there other artists who lived in your building or very nearby?

MS. STEIR: Yes. Other artists lived in the building. Upstairs was Nancy Graves. Below was Janet Froelich, who's now the editor of the *Times* fashion magazine. And she was before - the art editor.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: And she was before the art editor of the Sunday magazine. But then she was trying to be a painter, an artist of some sort. And below us, an art historian. So Nancy Graves above, Red Grooms across the street, and Joan Snyder down the street. And later I moved into Joan's building.

MS. RICHARDS: So was there - there was a lot of camaraderie and support among women artists in the '70s?

MS. STEIR: Incredible. Incredible. There was Joan. There was - and then I got a job in the early '70s also at CalArts [California Institute of Arts, Valencia], and I taught at CalArts half a - for one whole year, and then for half a year, until '75.

MS. RICHARDS: And what was that like, being in a completely different art world?

MS. STEIR: Well, I'm very bad - it wasn't so different.

MS. RICHARDS: No. It wasn't - I pictured that the approach to teaching was totally different than the East Coast art schools.

MS. STEIR: Well, this is what happened.

MS. RICHARDS: And the teaching -

MS. STEIR: I was at a dinner with Marcia and Bruce Nauman, and Bruce, at 30, was having his retrospective at the Pasadena Museum [Pasadena Museum of California Arts, CA]. He said, "Why don't you come?" So I thought, why not? And John Baldessari, who I also knew - when I met Marcia, Marcia introduced me to the art world, to all those women, to all - to John Baldessari, to all the people that I know still. Elizabeth [Murray]. Mary. They were good - Mary Heilmann I met on my own, and Joan Snyder I met on my own. [Laughs.] But the others she introduced me to.

And - when I went, John Baldessari asked me if I would do a lecture. So I had been - my work had been well known for about, I don't know, six months. A year. John put signs up all over the school saying, "Somewhat famous artist" -

[They laugh.]

- "is here." You know, "Pat Steir is here to do a guest lecture." And I did the lecture. Paul Brach was there, and he asked me if I had a job, if I wanted a job. Well -

MS. RICHARDS: He was the head of the department?

MS. STEIR: Yeah. He was the head of the department. And he was a genius head of a department. And so I said, "Sure." Well, I had been staying with Bruce and his then-wife Judy – and they –

MS. RICHARDS: So he was teaching there, too?

MS. STEIR: No. No, I just met him through Marcia because, if you remember, Marcia did a show of his work, too, when he was a baby.

MS. RICHARDS: And he was living in Southern California?

MS. STEIR: Pasadena.

MS. RICHARDS: Pasadena?

MS. STEIR: But CalArts, was it in Valencia then?

MS. STEIR: Valencia. It was a drive. So I said, "Till I find an apartment, can I stay in your house?" He said, "Yes." He said, "There'll be another guest. Will you feed the parrot next door?" And I said, "Yes." And he left me this beautiful fancy car that I could drive, very trustingly, and went away. And I don't know how long he was gone. One day he called up, very angry. "Pat, the neighbor tells me you're living with a man there." I said, "It's your other guest." That was Sol LeWitt, and we stayed together for years after that. [Laughs.] We stayed together for years, and stayed friends forever. And I'm close to his family. His wife is a good friend.

MS. RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] So how long were you living in Bruce Nauman's house in Pasadena?

MS. STEIR: Not so long. I got an apartment.

MS. RICHARDS: Six months or –

MS. STEIR: Yeah, maybe six months, three months. And then I got an apartment.

MS. RICHARDS: Closer to school?

MS. STEIR: Closer to school, which was awful.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Closer to school, there's nothing in that –

MS. STEIR: So I was every day going someplace in the car. I met artists there – you know, Chuck Arnoldi, Ed Ruscha, all the California artists.

MS. RICHARDS: Was the atmosphere for women artists better? Worse?

MS. STEIR: Much worse. I mean, those guys are really – but they're nice to me now. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: But then?

MS. STEIR: They weren't not nice to me, but –

MS. RICHARDS: But when Paul Brach invited you to teach, do you think it's because he was consciously wanting to add a strong woman to the faculty?

MS. STEIR: They had – but they had already – Miriam Schapiro was his wife.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah?

MS. STEIR: And they were beginning to have this feminist art department. No. Paul didn't want strong women or not. He thought I would be a good teacher.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MS. STEIR: That's all. And then they started the feminist art department. I didn't teach in it, and they – I was just writing a letter because I think that nobody knows that early work. Well, I had a big fight with Lucy Lippard, though we stayed friends, an argument, an ongoing discussion, about the feminist – teaching feminist art to a group of women. I was very against it. I thought it was ghettoizing, anti-inclusion.

MS. RICHARDS: Because I actually haven't heard about a feminist art department. Does it exist in a lot of other

places?

MS. STEIR: Just at CalArts. Mimi Schapiro and Judy – I'm sure you have, but you don't remember. Or I'm not calling it the right name. They had a department, headed by Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago, teaching art to women. You know, and they did – oh, no, it was very famous. You've heard of it.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay.

MS. STEIR: I'm just not calling it the right thing. You know, they did *The Dollhouse* [Miriam Schapiro and Sherry Brody, 1972] and had –

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. Sure.

MS. STEIR: That's from there.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, okay.

MS. STEIR: Whatever that is really called, that's what it was.

MS. RICHARDS: I see.

MS. STEIR: I didn't teach in that. I didn't agree with it. So I had a wonderful woman – and then I taught in a different way. I taught drawing classes and painting classes, and my star students, and still good friends, were David Salle and Ross Bleckner. [Laughs.] And Ross drove me everywhere until I could get a drivers license. I'm a terrible driver. I had to take driving lessons again to get a license. I think I tried three times, and three was the last you could do. And finally I got a license, and he didn't have to drive me anymore. But I wasn't – they were graduate students, so I wasn't that much older than they were. And in fact – my work gets thrown in with their –

MS. RICHARDS: Was Sol LeWitt teaching there, too? What was he doing there?

MS. STEIR: No. He was busy becoming famous. He was there because he was – I guess he was going to have a show at the Pasadena Art Museum [sic]. That's why he was there. And, you know, his shows are long. He came to talk to them, and then he stayed. Maybe – then he went back to New York, and then I started to teach half a year, and I shared – then Lynda Benglis taught half a year, and I taught half a year. Lynda had a fabulous apartment, and I used it the half a year she wasn't. And I often, when I have a show – she shows at the same gallery in New York now – I ask – they have a hallway you can see into. And I always say, "Why don't you hang a Lynda there?" Because when I painted the roses there in California, the crossed-out roses –

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MS. STEIR: – which came after the one in "High Times, Hard Times."

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: And there was always a – Lynda always left some sculpture hanging, and one couldn't move it. You just had to cover it not to put paint on it. And so I got used to seeing, especially, the roses with those knots. She had started to do the knots. They looked good together. [Laughs.] So I got to know Lynda, actually, in California.

MS. RICHARDS: So when you – you taught for, you said, a year and a half?

MS. STEIR: Oh, no. I taught for about four years.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MS. STEIR: But for the first year, for a whole year, and then for the other – or for the first two years, a whole year, and then for the other years, a half a year.

MS. RICHARDS: How did being there affect or influence your work?

MS. STEIR: I started to make black paintings.

[They laugh.]

MS. RICHARDS: It was that bad?

MS. STEIR: Because it was so bright. And the school gave me a studio. And I asked for a studio with a big window and huge view, and then I had to keep the shade closed all the time because it was too bright to see colors. You couldn't see colors in so much light. So I started to do those black paintings with – you see they all have color

scales and rainbows in them.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] Yes.

MS. STEIR: And the roses crossed out I painted there, after the four quartets with T. S. Eliot. They all have lines from those poems as their titles.

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MS. STEIR: But the one unusual painting I painted there was *Line Lima* as in lima bean, and that's the one that the Whitney showed in the big show.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were there, and you had a studio at the school, did the painters talk to each other? Did you feel that that was a supportive environment?

MS. STEIR: Oh, yeah. It was wonderful. There weren't many painters. Maybe - yeah. But there was John Baldessari, and around in the neighborhood was Michael Asher. And I was friends with Eric Orr and Ron Cooper and Larry Bell and all those guys, you know. [Laughs.] The studio that I shared with Lynda was, like, in the center of guyland.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MS. STEIR: All the guys - it was very nice. I had a good time.

MS. RICHARDS: Lynda was also from the East Coast, wasn't she?

MS. STEIR: She's from New Orleans [LA].

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, right. Of course.

MS. STEIR: And she moves around a lot, still.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: But no, everybody - I mean -

MS. RICHARDS: So do you think it had a positive impact on your work, being there? Or if not positive, it would - your work reflected that experience?

MS. STEIR: I'm not sure. I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: Or it might have been the same if you were painting in New York at that moment in your mind?

MS. STEIR: I can't say that, either, because everything affects everyone. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: From -

MS. STEIR: So I'm sure I - let's say I can't pinpoint how it affected the work. But I'm positive it did, and I'll you why, because I always said, well, I just - you know, red is red. Blue is blue. I use red and blue and black and white and yellow, and how can anything affect that? But one summer I spent the summer in Rome, using a friend's very small studio. And I painted very small paintings. And I put them in my bag when it was time to come home, and when I opened the bag and looked at the paintings, Rome jumped out. Roman colors jumped out. And so that - of course, California affected the work, but I can't say how.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. I'm just going to change the tape.

[END MD 01 TR 01.]

MS. STEIR: There was nothing to do. Oh, I painted some very strange - I have a new book out, and I don't have a copy of it here. I would love to show you that earliest work, the student work. But next week, I will.

MS. RICHARDS: Tomorrow.

MS. STEIR: Oh, tomorrow. Tomorrow? I don't know if I can get the book between now and tomorrow. It's in the studio.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: But if I can –

MS. RICHARDS: I might be able to find an image online. If I just write –

MS. STEIR: No. They're not on – well, the early work that I exhibited must be online. Maybe. I haven't looked. But I'm thinking this –

MS. RICHARDS: Is the book at Cheim & Read [Chelsea, NY]? I'm going to Chelsea this weekend.

MS. STEIR: No, it's not. It's not – it just came out, officially.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MS. STEIR: And Cheim & Read – it appears that Cheim & Read likes to sell their own publications. They might have a copy of the book in the back if you ask for it. It's the new book by Charta, Charta. Don't let them make you pay for it, because I gave them my books.

MS. RICHARDS: I'll just look at it.

MS. STEIR: It's heavy, anyway.

MS. RICHARDS: So let's pick up where we left off. We were talking about the paintings you did when you were at CalArts. You were there for four years. How did it end up that you left, you stopped teaching there?

MS. STEIR: Sol said, "Do you want to go to Paris?" [Laughs.] And that's another long story. I have a lot of long stories. And I said, "Sure." And he said, "Then come back to New York. Pack up." So I did. It was not the end of a semester, but close to it. And I said, "Paul, I have to go." [Laughs.] And what happened is Paul quit, too. He said, "Oh, that's a good idea. I've been here too long." And he quit at the end of the semester and came back to New York with Mimi. Anyway, I guess it was around '75.

MS. RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] So you went to Paris?

MS. STEIR: What happened is Sol was having one show after the other in Europe. And – [laughs] – I'd like to think it was love alone, but he needed somebody to drive him.

[They laugh.]

MS. RICHARDS: Just as you had.

MS. STEIR: On the way to Paris, he said – so he came to Southern California, and I got all my stuff together. I didn't have furniture, so, you know, it was just clothes, and I sent –

MS. RICHARDS: And art.

MS. STEIR: No. I sent the art back. So he – but I had all my, you know, clothes, suitcases. He said, "Oh, I have to make a stop in Oakland to finish some prints I'm making with Crown Point Press." I didn't know what Crown Point Press was or what Oakland was, either, but we went there. He didn't tell Kathan Brown he was bringing anyone with him, so she was surprised. But I remember the day – my relationship with Kathan is so important to me. We've worked together since then.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. We'll talk about your printmaking for sure. So did you –

MS. STEIR: And so there was – Kathan was absolutely the prettiest girl I ever saw. And she's bouncing a ball, and a big Dalmatian named YoYo is jumping for the ball. It was like a picture. Anyway, she was surprised to see me, but she handled it.

MS. RICHARDS: Sounds like [Tom] Wesselmann or something.

[They laugh.]

MS. STEIR: It was beautiful. She handled it, and there we were. And he made his prints, and I went there every day to watch what he was doing. And they were so good.

MS. RICHARDS: What was the print medium he was using?

MS. STEIR: Etching. She's an etching – she does only etchings. And –

MS. RICHARDS: Did you study etching at –

MS. STEIR: Yeah, yeah, because – etching and lithography.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: So coincidentally, a few years later Spencer Museum [University of Kansas Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence] in Kansas asked me if I would make a print for their – to give away, a giveaway print for them.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] A benefit.

MS. STEIR: Yeah. But they paid me to make the print, and I asked Kathan if she would be the printer. She was still doing job printing. And in fact, the prints that Sol made there were – she was printing, not publishing, job printing. So I made about a hundred prints when I was there, and I started to get on the telephone and call New York. I was about to call Marian Goodman, because she was a print dealer –

MS. RICHARDS: Wait. Okay. So you're not talking about the first time you went with Sol?

MS. STEIR: No. This is later.

MS. RICHARDS: A couple of years, when Spencer –

MS. STEIR: A year or two later. Not much.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, okay. And you went to make the Spencer print, but at the same time you started making more prints?

MS. STEIR: Yeah. And then Kathan said – she was just beginning to publish. She had published one of her husband, Tom Marioni's, prints and a Chris Burden print. She said, "I'll publish them."

So anyway, back to Paris. Sol made his prints. I made friends with Kathan. And I went to Paris with Sol, it turned out, a thousand times, and to Germany, a thousand times. And we drove back and forth across Europe hundreds of times. And he had shows everywhere. And he didn't have to carry anything, you know. We carried a pencil. [Laughs.] And everywhere we went, I would ask the dealer if they had – it's important because I work with a lot of those people to this day, only the women. The women asked me, "What do you do?" The men didn't ask me anything. I was just there.

MS. RICHARDS: It must – was it – it was very obvious to you that the little progress, or the progress that women artists had made in the U.S., was huge compared to the situation that women artists faced in Europe.

MS. STEIR: Not really.

MS. RICHARDS: It was not as [inaudible]?

MS. STEIR: Well, in retrospect, it seemed huge then. I was very active in the feminist movement. Totally active. Completely invested. And although I went to Europe a lot with Sol, I was also in New York a lot. And we had – I was completely invested in the feminist movement. I was a founding – part of a consciousness-raising group that started in the early '70s, or late '60s, I believe, and lasted until, you know, we all had grey hair. A lot of artists in them – Jane Kaufman, Joan Snyder, Elke Solomon, who was a curator then at the Whitney. Who else?

MS. RICHARDS: Did you know Susan Rothenberg when she came to New York?

MS. STEIR: Yes. And I still see her lovely daughter, Maggie. Yes. Susan seemed a lot younger then, but it turns out she's not so much younger – [laughs] – you know. So I was very active in New York. And I was an editor at *Semiotext(e)* magazine, which had, among other agendas of inclusion, a feminist agenda. And one day Sol and I were crossing a street in Genoa [Italy], and I said, "You know, if art doesn't work out for me, I need to have another business. I would like to publish artists' books. Will you back me?" And he said, "Yes." And we started a little private company called Printed Matter. And after we did about 10 books, we realized, this is not going to – [laughs] – this was not my alternative profession. And we wrote to Edit deAk, who wrote to Lucy Lippard and Carl Andre and a number of other people – Walter Robinson –

MS. RICHARDS: When did you start Printed Matter? When was that?

MS. STEIR: I think it was '75, '76. And –

MS. RICHARDS: You started it thinking that it would be supporting you, besides that you really love to do it? And –

MS. STEIR: Yeah. I thought it would be a business, like a little –

MS. RICHARDS: And then it turned out that it was very successful, but not financially?

MS. STEIR: To say the least. It's never been financially successful.

MS. RICHARDS: It's a nonprofit. Right?

MS. STEIR: It's a nonprofit. And so then we had – Ingrid Sischy became our manager later, a year or two later. And she, with the help of some of us board members, wrote a – applied for not-for-profit status, which was very hard to get for a store. And we wrote a little – in our application, we said, well, actually, books are – performance spaces get not-for-profit, and books are a not-for-profit for shut-ins, are performances for shut-ins. Anyway, miraculously, we got to be a not-for-profit, and quickly, I think within a year or so of opening Printed Matter. And when we were a for-profit, we published some books. And altogether, Printed Matter published 10 books. And I worked as the art director when – [laughs] –

MS. RICHARDS: Did that mean –

MS. STEIR: Not for profit. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: What did that mean, being art director of Printed Matter?

MS. STEIR: Well, it meant nothing except we were going to publish books, and somebody had to put them together. Without a computer, it meant doing pasteup, design –

MS. RICHARDS: So the books you printed weren't designed and made by artists? They weren't [inaudible].

MS. STEIR: Well, some of them. Some of them. But a lot of them, like – what's her name – Eve Sonneman – she had pairs of pictures, but somebody had to make it into a book.

MS. RICHARDS: I see. So you designed the book?

MS. STEIR: So I designed the book. And we did a really marvelous book for – I have to do my homework. I'll tell you what it was. So we did 10 books altogether, and somebody had to design them. People – because later, when it became a not-for-profit, and we got clear what we were going to do, see, the 10 books were still maybe – when it got clear what we were going to do, people just came with a book, a totally designed, printed book. And Printed Matter became the distributor for the book. But with those 10 books, they came with an idea and some material.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: Maybe some of them came with a whole book, but I can't remember anyone who did.

MS. RICHARDS: So when you realized that –

MS. STEIR: Flash Art. We did a book for Flash Art, and that was the –

MS. RICHARDS: And –

MS. STEIR: – the best designed book, let's say.

MS. RICHARDS: Of course, during all that time you were continuing painting.

MS. STEIR: Yeah. I would do it after – in the afternoon, before I went to the gym. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: That was a – to be going to the gym in the '70s was not usual.

MS. STEIR: Well, we had a –

MS. RICHARDS: Was that the beginning of long-term kind of philosophy of –

MS. STEIR: No. I haven't been to – I haven't been to the gym in a year. I dropped it. This is what happened, and it's a funny story. I went to the gym and jogged and swam every afternoon. One day I said to Sol, "You know, you have a big stomach. You ought to swim." And he started to swim. And you know, to this day, his whole family swims? [Laughs.] He took the advice. If you look at his work, you can see how clearly he takes advice – [laughs] – gives it and takes it. So he still swam until he was too sick to swim. But me, I didn't, no. I gave it up. [Laughs.] I went to the gym often, but now, no. My studio is on 26th Street, far away from here, and so once I get there, I don't want to leave.

MS. RICHARDS: I just was imagining – wondering – if some kind of physical sport or activity had a long-standing

part in your life.

MS. STEIR: No. I do – I did, for a long time, force myself to go to the gym or do Pilates or walk or jog. But –

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Are there any other kind of – not hobbies, but activities that – whether music or anything else – that somehow has a relationship to your work?

MS. STEIR: Music. Music. I studied the piano for years, from the time I was five till I was 17. And I play so badly, I have to play when nobody's home. But – [laughs] – that piano belonged – I had a big opera-sized grand piano. But it's in John Cheim's house. It's too big for this house. I had it in the loft, and it has a beautiful voice. He doesn't play the piano. He uses it as sculpture. It's being mistreated. And this is – this belonged to Kiki's sister, the one who passed away. And it belongs to her niece now. But she didn't want it in her house because she didn't – I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: She took – she didn't like the amount of room it took up. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: So do you still play, or you just listen?

MS. STEIR: I don't play any more. I just listen. But I love to listen.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you listen to music all the time you're working, or in between?

MS. STEIR: Sometimes I go through phases of listening to music when I'm working. But the music changes the mood, so it's hard to access me. So I like to just sit down and listen – [laughs] – to music.

MS. RICHARDS: When you're working, you're not listening to the radio or –

MS. STEIR: Never the radio. But sometimes I listen to Bach when I'm working, or Mozart, or Satie. Simple Bach. I don't like full orchestra sound. But sometimes I listen to jazz. I became, I guess in the late '70s, great friends with John Cage. He had thousands of great friends, and I was one of them, lucky enough to be one of them. Two big influences, John Cage and Agnes Martin, in my life. I forgot to say that.

MS. RICHARDS: When did each of those begin to be [inaudible]?

MS. STEIR: I met Agnes Martin in, I think it was, 1971. Douglas Crimp, who was a friend of mine and still is, did a show at the School of Visual Arts [New York City] of Agnes Martin's paintings. And that show got – in that dinky little gallery – got incredibly positive reviews. Agnes had already moved to New Mexico. She invited Douglas – she was officially a hermit. She invited Douglas to visit her. He got all the way to New Mexico. He's writing about it now, about that –

MS. RICHARDS: Did he – had he known her when she lived in New York?

MS. STEIR: Maybe. I never asked him. I didn't.

MS. RICHARDS: No. That was before you were here.

MS. STEIR: He got to New Mexico, and he got shy, an attack of shyness. And he called me on the telephone, and he said, "If you get on the next plane, I'll pay your ticket." Anyway, I adored Agnes's work. I couldn't look at it without bursting into tears. I was so moved by it, and I could not explain why. So we went.

And the first painting, the first real painting that I did, that I think I did, was called *Looking for the Mountain*, and it was looking for Agnes's place on top of the mesa. We got lost for 12 hours. Thirsty. Sunny. We had no – and finally we went to the post office and asked if they knew how to get there, and they told us again. And we couldn't find it. And finally, we just sat at the bottom of the mesa. And sooner or later she came down in a pickup truck.

[They laugh.]

But like 12 hours later, she started to – where are they? And she drove – we followed her back up, and she –

MS. RICHARDS: Did you get lost because they were really – the roads weren't marked at all?

MS. STEIR: She lived on top of a mesa, and you had to – we couldn't find the road to go up. And we were going up dirt roads. It was like a dirt road.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: And we couldn't find the roads. And we were not experienced with that part of the country, although I actually was. I had gone there – God, when you talk about your life, there's so many threads. I had gone to school with somebody – to Pratt with somebody who became a teacher of the Navajo Indians in the desert, and every time she took a vacation, which was August and January, I would go stay in her house. She had a house on the Navajo reservation that they let her live in.

MS. RICHARDS: And where was that?

MS. STEIR: In Ganado, Arizona. So I was actually familiar –

MS. RICHARDS: That's the northeast part of Arizona, kind of –

MS. STEIR: No. It's in a straight line from Albuquerque to, you know –

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, okay. Just east of Phoenix?

MS. STEIR: Yeah. On the way. And Agnes lived in Cuba, actually. You could pass her house – anyway, so I was very familiar. For years I had been doing that, since I graduated. And a lot of the earliest paintings, and the *Night Chant* painting [from the series, 1973] that's in the ICA [Institute of Contemporary Arts, Philadelphia] show, is from that period. Let's say, not from that period but from that influence. The night chant, that's what the Navajos do.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. STEIR: They cure schizophrenia in the middle of the winter at night by naming, like Freud, what you did in your past. They made you nuts, you know. So let's say you touched a cactus, and you picked the bloom, and that's what's wrong – like that. But it was very musical, too. But you couldn't tell what the Navajos were doing. They would chant in a very low way. Not so audible. Anyway, I wouldn't go. I'd hear it from a distance. They would move very subtly. You couldn't tell that it was a dance and a chant. [Laughs.]

And so I was familiar with that part of the country. But we couldn't find our way. Maybe we were nervous. Maybe the roads were bad. Anyway, she led us right up there. But she lived, you know, quite a few miles up the side of a thing on the flat part of the mesa.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. STEIR: And she had built herself a beautiful adobe house. But she hadn't a studio yet. And – Douglas went to sleep out on a cot in the woods, and I sat –

MS. RICHARDS: The woods? There aren't too many trees. What kind of woods were there? Well, maybe there were short pine trees.

MS. STEIR: Yeah. Somewhere out, out where there were a lot of mosquitoes. And I sat up most of the night talking to Agnes in her room. She was – it was so beautiful. There was a fireplace on one side and a rocker. She sat in the rocker. By the window, there was a table that – she had cooked fried chicken and had white wine for us, so we had a big dinner with her that she made. And then Douglas went to sleep after a while. There probably weren't woods. I imagine there were woods. Agnes and I talked about love. And Agnes said she once fell in love with a cow, but it was very difficult because she could only look into one eye at a time.

[They laugh.]

Then she asked to see my notebook. And I said no. Before Douglas went to sleep, he took a sketchbook out of the car and handed it to me, because I would write and sketch at night before I went to sleep. And she wanted to see it, and I said no. And you have to remember, it was the first time – she said, "I haven't seen anybody" – meaning anybody from the art world – "except Sam Wagstaff." So we were the first – because Sam was dear her friend – first others that she saw.

And in the morning – I said no, and she got upset. And I said no because she was my hero, and I thought the work wasn't good enough. And she got upset because she was a hermit and hadn't seen anybody but Sam Wagstaff for a number of years, and here I refused her just – so in the morning she asked us to leave, even though we were supposed to stay and help her chop down trees and do some things for a few days. And I cried all the way to Salt Lake City. My nose started to bleed. I got my period. And Douglas kept saying, "What's wrong? What's wrong? Why did we leave?" In fact, our car wouldn't start, and she fixed it for us just to get rid of us.

But what happened was – the next thing that happened is – funny, Pasadena Museum, I never had a show there, but it's a big thing in my life – she had a show at Pasadena Museum. And the curator –

MS. RICHARDS: This is the pre-Norton Simon [Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, CA]?

MS. STEIR: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah? Okay.

MS. STEIR: And the curator knew I knew her and asked if I would be her escort, Agnes's escort. And Agnes looked at me, and she said, "You're just like a bad penny. You turn up." But it was a compliment. I can't explain it, but it was a compliment. And then *Ms.* magazine wanted – it's funny how you can be an anonymous person as people know everything, but when you want people to know something, they can't hear it. When you try to tell, like, "Look at my work" [shouting], they can't hear it. But I'm privately friends with Agnes Martin. I visited her once. Everybody knows. It was the strangest thing.

So *Ms.* magazine interviewed her – well, maybe they knew because one of the women on the staff was in my consciousness-raising group – and invited me to be her escort. And there we had the funniest time, laughing, eating. All the women sat in a circle in the offices and – anyway, they interviewed Agnes and –

MS. RICHARDS: In Pasadena?

MS. STEIR: No. This was *Ms.* magazine in New York, after Pasadena.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, okay.

MS. STEIR: After I'd been her date and – I'm not so clear. You're going to have trouble with this.

MS. RICHARDS: That's all right.

MS. STEIR: And I visited Agnes every year, until the year she died, after that. I'd go every August to New Mexico and visit Agnes. I had a little routine. I would stay – arrive – I have a lot of allergies and so does my friend Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, who is married to Richard Tuttle. A lot of dust allergies. So I'd go stay with the Tutttles overnight. By then I didn't have a driver's license. I would get a car and driver, or Richard would drive me to Agnes. I was –

MS. RICHARDS: How far was it? That's from Galisteo?

MS. STEIR: From Galisteo first, and then from – when she lived in Galisteo, I always got a car and driver. But when she lived in the old people's home in Taos – Galisteo was easy from where the Tutttles lived. They were living in Santa Fe. It was nothing. But when she moved to the old people's home, then I would start to stay with the Tutttles, and Richard would drive me. Then I would stay the night with Agnes in the old people's home – [laughs] – because she didn't have a – she had like a garden apartment, so it was very – she had a guest room with a guest shower in it and toilet.

MS. RICHARDS: That's an extraordinary nursing home, or old people's home.

MS. STEIR: It wasn't even expensive. There were people, you know, on Social Security there. It's just better everywhere than New York, you know. And she had her little garden in front of it and a little garden in the back, and a kitchen and a living room and a bedroom.

MS. RICHARDS: So that was visiting her every year for more than 20 or –

MS. STEIR: For 30 years. And on her 90th birthday, Ned Rifkin asked me to give a toast, and it was such a pleasure. Then I explained how I saw her work. And – [laughs] – Arne [Glimcher] was pushing her in a wheelchair. She could walk then, but she was in a wheelchair. And I leaned over to talk to her, and when I stood up, she said something. Arne said, "What did she say?" I said, "She said I look great." [Laughs.] She was a friend.

MS. RICHARDS: Can you – do you recognize any influences of her work on your work?

MS. STEIR: Not in the way my work looks. Well, you'll see parts of her work in this early work you haven't seen yet. You'll see that influence very directly. But the influence from Agnes was, be myself. Be myself. Do it from the heart. Don't judge it. Be myself. The influence was, Agnes was herself. She did –

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: – her work. In the middle of people making abstract expression, Agnes –

MS. RICHARDS: Right. Right. Although –

MS. STEIR: And she thought of it -

MS. RICHARDS: - her work and Sol's work obviously has a kinship.

MS. STEIR: I knew Agnes before Sol. It does have a kinship, though. Can't say it didn't. But I knew Agnes first. Maybe Agnes -

MS. RICHARDS: When you -

MS. STEIR: I knew Agnes before I went to CalArts to teach and -

MS. RICHARDS: Because of your friend at Pratt who was - no?

MS. STEIR: Because of Douglas Crimp, who did the show. And I think that was about 1971. And Sol hadn't - no, I knew Sol, but he was doing structures, primary structures.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: And later he did those exquisite line drawings.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Well, you said a few minutes ago that there were two major artists - you said Agnes and -

MS. STEIR: Agnes Martin and John Cage.

MS. RICHARDS: That's right. Okay. So can you talk about your relationship with John Cage?

MS. STEIR: Well, John was hilariously funny. Did you know him? He was very funny. But again, the influence was - well, I was influenced by John's notion of chaos, you know, chaotic system, which I felt I didn't need a system for. I was chaotic enough without a system. Maybe if I live long enough, I'll get to have a system. I do have a system. In fact, I do. There is a system to my work, very clearly, and limits, conceptual limits. So the embracing of chaos and the "be yourself."

MS. RICHARDS: And that stems back to the late '60s, or early '70s, as well?

MS. STEIR: No. The friendship with John was not until '78.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh. Who introduced you to him?

MS. STEIR: Kathan Brown had invited a group of artists to a South Sea island.

MS. RICHARDS: Really?

MS. STEIR: Yes. And everybody did performances. And John was there. I met John and Marina Abramovic. And the three of us fell in love. We didn't even talk to anybody else. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: At this point in time, that sounds like an extraordinary thing for her to do.

MS. STEIR: Yeah. I guess she had money that she could - extra money. It was either pay taxes with it or do something for business.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MS. STEIR: And so she could take everybody there as work. And we did work. We each did a performance. There's a record. She made a record. She recorded it. And John was there.

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you about the art world at that time, where there were so many connections to artists who did performance of various sorts that is different these days. But did that have a - is there anything you'd want to talk about in terms of your relationship to other performing artists besides Cage, whether dancers, choreographers -

MS. STEIR: I'm very close to Joan Jonas. I've made friends with her since the beginning of time. I can't even remember. And I love her work. And I'm very close to Anne Waldman. Mei-mei Berssenbrugge is a fantastic abstract poet. I'm doing a project now with Anne Waldman. And Mei-mei is a fantastic abstract poet. I was friends with Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown, though I like her and her work less than I did before. Yvonne is some kind of dance genius.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] Yeah.

MS. STEIR: Because there was, you know, St. Mark's [Church, New York City] and, you know -

MS. RICHARDS: Judson [Memorial Church, New York City].

MS. STEIR: Judson. All of that. And when I was at Pratt, I did perform in some performances, and I was in a - but it wasn't me.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there early happenings at that point? No, not when you were at Pratt. But afterwards?

MS. STEIR: Afterward there were, yeah, and I was in one of what's - Allan Kaprow's - around California. Where you had to walk miles to be in it. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: It was here or there?

MS. STEIR: California. It was in California, Northern California, where he lived, or Southern. It was Southern California.

MS. RICHARDS: Around San Diego?

MS. STEIR: Yeah. It was around San Diego. And I was in a lot of Joan's work, too. But I never thought - it was like she couldn't pay anybody. I had to be the one. [Laughs.] But I never thought of doing it myself, except as a student I did, but not later.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MS. STEIR: Not as an artist, and still not. But I would say my dearest friends are performers and poets.

MS. RICHARDS: And that's still that connection to your early love of poetry.

MS. STEIR: Yes. Yes. Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you ever write poetry?

MS. STEIR: Always.

MS. RICHARDS: But you've never felt ambivalent about how much time you spend - that you should spend less time as a painter and more time as a poet?

MS. STEIR: Well, there's enough time to do both. Maybe I'll publish my poetry, but under another name, so it's not judged in the - that it's judged fresh.

MS. RICHARDS: When you - just a few more minutes to start another subject. I was going to ask you about printmaking, and you started at that point when you first met Kathan - no, I mean, when you were commissioned to do that print in Kansas City. At that point, what was the relationship of that printmaking to your painting?

MS. STEIR: Everything. I use the printmaking as a kind of drawing and working - I don't know if we have enough time because I have to go at two [o'clock].

MS. RICHARDS: Okay.

MS. STEIR: This is a long -

MS. RICHARDS: Stop if you want to.

MS. STEIR: Yeah. It's a long story because there's a real solid relationship.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay. We'll talk about it tomorrow.

MS. STEIR: The images in the prints always come before the paintings. I use it as a way of layering - and I'll talk about why my paintings have a system that's hidden, but there.

MS. RICHARDS: One maybe short question. Since that early involvement with the Civil Rights Movement when you were in Atlanta, and then, of course, you talked about the feminist movement - does politics, has politics or political issues played a major role in your life or anything substantial, or very, or not?

MS. STEIR: Well, I'm thinking about when - I have one more show this season, and I'm doing a big print project with Dick Solomon at Pace [Pace Prints, The Fine Art of Prints, New York City]. But I'm thinking after that's done,

if Hillary [Clinton] is still around, I'm going to work for her. I always give money or a big painting to the Democratic party, so I – I don't know. I like Hillary. [They laugh.]

Last night I had dinner with friends, and a woman my age was one of them, and she almost bit my head off, me and another person. She was such a – I've never seen her like that. She was such an adamant Barack [Obama] defender. But I think he's just a boy. He needs to cook a while. But I don't know. I don't know if this country can elect a white woman or a black man, the Democrats. It's too bad that [John] Edwards didn't get more support, wasn't more outspoken. It was our only chance. I'm really scared.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, maybe, since it's two o'clock, on that pessimistic –

[END MD 01 TR 02.]

This is Judith Richards interviewing Pat Steir at 80 McDougal Street, New York City, on March 2, 2008, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disk number three.

[Conversation regarding birth year in progress.]

MS. STEIR: Occupation: Artist. So I'm putting both years.

MS. RICHARDS: Good.

MS. STEIR: That's confusing.

MS. RICHARDS: Why don't we start with that conversation about your birth date for the recorder?

MS. STEIR: The two birthdays.

MS. RICHARDS: The two birthdays.

MS. STEIR: I carried around, you know, for years, a birth certificate and a passport that I got when I was very young with that birth certificate, and the marriage license from my first marriage, to prove I was married and divorced, the change of name. I lost that birth certificate, and when I wrote to my home town, the hospital where I was born – the town, really, the Hall of Records –

But, you know, they're chaotic in Newark, so you never know what – I got back that my birthday was a month earlier than I thought, even though I had – then I recalled that the birth certificate I had had never been notarized, was not notarized. Normally a birth certificate is notarized. The birth certificate I had said April 10, but the birth certificate that came in the mail from the Hall of Records said March 10, both in 1938. I'll explain later.

The only thing that I could think of why that – well, both my parents had already passed away – I could think of about that difference of date was – well, I thought of two things, that I was premature, and so it went down in the Hall of Records, which I was told was chronological, at the moment I came out of my mother's womb, but they didn't give my parents a birth certificate until I survived. They kept a baby in an incubator for a month at that time, or until it reached five pounds. I think they still do until five pounds. So that was that. So I don't know when I was – what month I was born in. But my parents were wacky, and it could be that they just wanted – that somehow they said, oh, make it April 10 – [laughs] – because it's spring. It's nice to have a kid's birthday party in the spring. That occurred to me, too.

So my friends in the early '70s were Elizabeth Murray, Joel Shapiro and Ellen Phelan, Joan Simon, who is younger, Keith Sonnier, Joan Snyder. Also the Rymans, and Lucy Lippard, and Sol, who were all older, conceptual people, minimal people. My people were what became postmodernism. The work my work was similar to was all the people born in 1940. So I changed my birth date to 1940 so I wouldn't be expected to be a minimalist – [laughs] – or a conceptualist.

MS. RICHARDS: When you changed it, you just simply –

MS. STEIR: Said a different date. From a certain point forward, which I believe was some time in the mid-'70s, when that difference appeared. You know, Joan Snyder was born in 1940. Lynda Benglis was 1940. They were all 1940. And here I was 1938. I said, I'm not part of that other generation. I'm part of this generation. So I changed it. But in fact –

MS. RICHARDS: Do you know anyone else who did that?

MS. STEIR: Many. Not for the same reasons. All reasons. But I won't say who.

[They laugh.]

[Ms. Steir whispers.]

MS. RICHARDS: Huh.

MS. STEIR: He, for sure. The last one, for sure.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: Because, actually, when I met him, even with my original birthday, he was older than me, and quite a bit older than his wife. And now they're the same age, and he's younger than I am.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: The other one, the first one, it made sense with his career to do that. He actually has – the first one actually has a whole degree in English literature, graduate degree. Nobody knows it.

MS. RICHARDS: I wanted to go back and – you started to talk about printmaking yesterday.

MS. STEIR: Oh, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: And your first experience of that, past studying at school. And you were commenting how important printmaking is to your work. And maybe you could talk about that. And also, at the same – if it connects – how drawing connects to the development of your work.

MS. STEIR: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: But if they're totally different, then let's just look at printmaking.

MS. STEIR: Okay. I always draw, and I always have drawn. And right now, Jan Howard and Susan Harris are putting together a drawing traveling retrospective.

MS. RICHARDS: What institution is that?

MS. STEIR: It's RISD [Rhode Island School of Design, Providence] Museum. Jan Howard is the drawing curator.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MS. STEIR: And because she wasn't –

MS. RICHARDS: When is that going to be?

MS. STEIR: In 2010.

MS. RICHARDS: So that will cover your work on paper, just drawing?

MS. STEIR: From student work until now, plus installation work.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that the first time such an exhibition has been –

MS. STEIR: No. Jan Howard – in 1982, Betsy Brown, Elizabeth Brown, from the American Museum of – National Museum of American Art at – the museum in Kansas – was it the Spencer in Kansas – did a drawing and print retrospective, and Jan was working there at the time. Then when she moved to Baltimore [MD]. She did a show of my drawings but not a retrospective. And so now she's doing another. So she's very familiar with the work.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] Anyway, going back to how you began your involvement with printmaking, and what is it –

MS. STEIR: Printmaking is a layered medium. Every color goes on a different plate, on a different copper etching plate.

MS. STEIR: And – the layered quality, what I've done with my printmaking is, every color – in fact, my work is conceptual. Every color has a different meaning for me – not the color of the meaning but the meaning of the whole image, and the colors are different in each plate. So let's say the blue plate represents one thing, one kind of form, the red plate another kind of form, the yellow plate another kind of form. And then when they're printed, some – I did one called *Form, Illusion, and Myth* [1983]. It had 12 copper plates and was as big as this table, only a rectangle.

MS. RICHARDS: What year was that?

MS. STEIR: I think it was '85, something like that.

MS. RICHARDS: That was 12 copper plates?

MS. STEIR: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: With 12 different colors?

MS. STEIR: Twelve different colors. And then the colors, because the colors are transparent, they mix, so they make 100 different colors. They mix on top of each other in different ways. There's a lot of calculation and -

MS. RICHARDS: So what you're saying is the layering is an intrinsic part of your painting as well as your printmaking process?

MS. STEIR: Yes. And so that I use the printmaking, although they become finished prints, as a kind of sketching for the paintings, particularly - although it's a finished print, not a sketch. It looks like a finished work of art. But it's working out ideas in layers. And right now I'm making a huge - and I've made many, many etchings with Crown Point Press. About 10 years ago, eight or 10 years ago, I started to work with Pace in New York, as well, for printmaking, with Dick Solomon. And it's like a ticket to heaven. He, as well as Kathan - they both - they don't - whatever I do is okay. They don't restrict. The bigger, the better. They let me make giant prints. I'm making a 72-inch-square print with Dick right now. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Where is that -

MS. STEIR: It's going to be -

MS. RICHARDS: Where is that printmaking shop?

MS. STEIR: In Brooklyn. They always had a shop in Manhattan, an etching shop, woodcuts. I think they did etching, woodcuts. And I don't think we're talking - I don't think I ever did lithography with them, or I don't think they do it. Sol had an assistant called Joe Watanabe, who printed most of his prints, did things for other people but mostly for Sol.

MS. RICHARDS: Let me write his name down, the printer.

MS. STEIR: Yeah. Joe Watanabe.

MS. RICHARDS: Joe?

MS. STEIR: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: W-A-N-T -

MS. STEIR: W-A-T-A-N-A-B-E, but you should check that spelling.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay.

MS. STEIR: Dick bought him a shop, opened a print shop and - I don't know what their arrangement is, if Joe is a partner or an employee in the shop. But he basically rescued Joe.

MS. RICHARDS: When was that?

MS. STEIR: Just, I guess, in the spring, last spring.

MS. RICHARDS: So you're working there on the 72-inch-square print?

MS. STEIR: Yeah. And I only worked with Joe once before, but we always wanted to work together. But because I had the arrangement with Kathan and the arrangement with Pace, to bring in a freelancer, basically, was inconvenient for everybody. But now I get to work with Joe, and he's a total, top professional. And so we're both looking forward to it.

MS. RICHARDS: For you, then, there wasn't an issue of prints being - having any negative impact in terms of the market for your work or -

MS. STEIR: Many, many of the people who now own paintings started by buying prints, my prints and others. And then they built up to becoming collectors of other art forms. I think printmaking is a major art form, and if you look at Kiki, Kiki Smith -

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. STEIR: - her major - her work is almost all prints. She had that print exhibition at the MOMA [Museum of Modern Art, New York City], and it was a major exhibition of major work.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. STEIR: She gave us a print last night. No, I think most of what I have that I collected is prints.

MS. RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MS. STEIR: No. It's a major art form. I know I ran into a collector and he said, "I own your work, but only posters." I said, "But I only made one poster. How can you own only posters?" He said, "Well, you know, etchings." I said, "Those are not posters. They're original artworks. Go back and be nicer to them." [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Were the people you - the artists - who you met different than people you met in your printmaking and in your -

MS. STEIR: No.

MS. RICHARDS: No? It was the same?

MS. STEIR: The two presses that I work with work with artists, not - I know that I - like if I look in a print journal, they say, "Printmaker, Pat Steir." But there is no difference. Art is art.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. Yeah.

MS. STEIR: And the people I met - making prints are making art. And if you look at Jim Dine, he makes - every time I go into Pace Prints, I say, "Who did that?" And it's another Jim Dine in another style. [Laughs.] And he makes more prints, you know - every year Dick sends me a case of wine, and Kiki says, thank Jim Dine - [laughs] - because he makes so many prints.

MS. RICHARDS: But they also sell them all, then?

MS. STEIR: And they sell them all. And they sell all of mine.

MS. RICHARDS: That's great.

MS. STEIR: I mean, it's expensive to make the prints. It's expensive for the publisher to make the prints. If they don't sell them, it's difficult for them to continue.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Yeah. Thinking about your - you were talking about your relationship with Dick Solomon at Pace Prints. Do you want to talk at all about your relationship with dealers and how that might have - we could speak of negative, or in a positive way, of how they have helped or affected your career?

MS. STEIR: Kathan Brown is my best friend. Dick Solomon is a dear friend. I really love Dick and his wife, Anne. They're really beautiful people. And so is Kathan. They're really dear friends. Now, I've never had - with the exception of Xavier Fourcade, who I foolishly left because I was bribed away with a bribe that never came true, there isn't a dealer who became my friend. There isn't a gallery - in New York - now, in Texas, Fredericka Hunter is my dealer, and we're very good friends. In Philadelphia, Sueyun Locks is my dealer, and we are very good friends. In Cincinnati, Carl Solway and I have worked together since, I think - I thought '73, but it turns out '71. And I just had a successful show there again.

MS. RICHARDS: And Carl is the father of Arthur?

MS. STEIR: Of Arthur. Now, when I met Carl, Arthur was a little boy. Played the piano for me. Now, of course, he has no - and he's heading toward - no hair, and he's heading toward old age. [Laughs.] Well, that's life.

MS. RICHARDS: Have -

MS. STEIR: New York dealers are so hungry.

MS. RICHARDS: And how has that changed in the - how has your whole relationship with dealers and the commercial side of your career changed from the '70s to today? Has it?

MS. STEIR: Well, I guess you can't say that any career, or most careers, don't change in a linear way. So my career has - started up. Started up, then it was down, then it was up, then it was down, or not all the way up or all the way down, but more up and more down.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MS. STEIR: And so it changes from time to time.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there any particular dealers who were really responsible for getting your work to be seen in Europe or some other venues? Or was that more the curators who did that, who brought your work to a broader – to the attention of different audiences or different critics?

MS. STEIR: In Europe, it happened because I lived a lot in Italy with Sol. And it happened in Germany and in –

MS. RICHARDS: [Inaudible.]

MS. STEIR: Oh, it happened – in Europe it happened more intrinsically. It happened in Switzerland because through – more like meeting people. In Switzerland, Adelina von Furstenberg, who was with the Artists' Space in Geneva, then became a freelancer, showed my work then at Grenoble. So I had Swiss dealers. In Germany, it happened through the Swiss dealer, who became a partner with a German man. And in Italy, it happened because I spent a lot of time in Italy with Sol, and his dealers started to show my work.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there any particular exhibitions of your work that you felt were really memorable, either because of the moment it represented in the development of your work, or in the reception those exhibitions had? Were there any particular exhibitions that were turning points or had major impact, that stand out?

MS. STEIR: Well, the first exhibition at Paley and Lowe [New York City], for sure – because before that I hadn't had any exhibition. [Laughs.] Well, I had had a few, you know, group shows and things, and I had had –

MS. RICHARDS: And where was Paley and Lowe?

MS. STEIR: Paley and Lowe was on Wooster and Grand – on the floor that – well, the Drawing Center is on the ground floor now.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh. Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MS. STEIR: I had a show in 1964, when I finished college, at Terry Dintenfass Gallery [New York City]. But on the way there, I saw the first [Andy] Warhol show I had ever seen, of Brillo boxes and things, on the way to my opening, and I thought, this is not going to work. And so I didn't have – I was in a few little group shows, but didn't have another show till 10 years later or – well, eight years later – at Paley and Lowe in the early '70s, like, I think '73, '71. I'm not sure of the dates, but the early '70s. I said, I'm not part of this Pop art thing. I'm going to wait till it passes. And then, of course, I made friends with all the minimalists, but I didn't become a minimalist till recently. [Laughs.]

So that first show – the next show that was very important to me was in 1984, the Brueghel [series] painting at the Brooklyn Museum [NY]. And that painting went to 12 museums, as a featured show in 12 different museums. It really traveled.

MS. RICHARDS: Who curated that show? Who put it together?

MS. STEIR: Charlotta Kotik. Yeah. She did. And –

MS. RICHARDS: Where is that?

MS. STEIR: In Bern, at the Kunstmuseum in Bern [Switzerland]. I just tried to buy it back, but they said they hang it. You know, it's the 16-foot-wide, 20-foot-high painting.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. STEIR: It's 84 panels. So – but it packs nicely because it's –

MS. RICHARDS: Why did you want to buy it back?

MS. STEIR: I thought I would like to have it – I don't know. I started to want all my paintings back. [Laughs.] Isn't that strange?

MS. RICHARDS: When did that feeling start?

MS. STEIR: A couple years ago.

MS. RICHARDS: Inspired by artists who have started their own museums? Or –

MS. STEIR: No. Just like a kind of stinginess. [Laughs.] I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you feel that their presence would impact your current thinking or your work?

MS. STEIR: No. No, this painting – this painting started a change in everything I do. When I did this painting –

MS. RICHARDS: It was exhibited in '84.

MS. STEIR: Done between, I think – I started the studies for it in about '70, maybe '80. I worked on the painting itself from '82 till '84, when it was exhibited.

MS. RICHARDS: It started – the first exhibition was at the Brooklyn Museum?

MS. STEIR: Yes. In the main hall that they don't have any more. I wanted to suggest that – I wanted to see it here again. I was going to suggest that they hang it again. But they don't have the hall anymore, so they – I didn't suggest it. Because when I did the painting, I studied painting. I studied painters. Like a Victorian lady getting a classic education, I went to museums, and I sketched. I looked. I traveled to look at paintings. I bought hundreds of books. I could tell –

I did it because I heard – in the late '70s, I heard architects talking about postmodernism. Nobody else was, just architects. And I thought, hey, I'm going to try to figure out if we're in the postmodern period. I don't think we are. I think we're not done with modernism. So I did this study to discover if we were in the postmodern era, and I came to the conclusion we weren't. However, this painting became kind of a symbol of postmodernism. It's on the cover of several textbooks, three textbooks, I think, about postmodernism. So – that's what happened.

MS. RICHARDS: And so it's owned by a museum in Switzerland?

MS. STEIR: Yeah, in Bern. Kunstmuseum in Bern. When I –

MS. RICHARDS: How did a major painting by an American artist –

MS. STEIR: I had a survey show there at that museum. And so they bought the painting.

MS. RICHARDS: So '64. Early '70s. Then a major show in 1984.

MS. STEIR: And the thing is that it wasn't the show that changed my work. It was the work. While I was doing that work, I discovered Japonism, when I was doing the Impressionists. And if you look at the painting – I had a show of that painting in the [Vincent] Van Gogh Museum [Amsterdam], and the director said two funny things to me. He said, "You really understand Vincent." And then at the dinner he said, "You know, this dinner is wonderful for me. It's the first time I ever had dinner with an artist. I never worked with a living artist before." [Laughs.] Because he was the director of the Van Gogh. He was in a historian museum. Now he's the director of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. A nice man.

Anyway, I discovered Japonism. And I had always loved Chinese painting, particularly the literati scholar paintings, landscape paintings, and Chinese paintings and poetry. And doing that study brought me, first, to Japonism, and to Impressionism. Who was the first modernist? And funny stories came out of it. Because I studied – in the studies for the painting, I studied [Gustave] Courbet really a lot.

I did a series of paintings after Courbet before I did the painting that was shown at Knoedler Gallery [New York City] and at Leo Castelli [New York City]. In that study of Courbet, I learned a lot about Courbet. And so when the Brooklyn Museum did the Courbet show, one of the curators came to me to ask if I thought Courbet was the first modernist, if he had seen Japanese prints, woodcuts. And I said, yes, I thought so, because *The Wave* [*The Wave after Courbet as Though Painted by Ensor, 1986?*] was very similar to that, hooked sideways.

And then she showed me a letter from a dealer to Courbet, and it sort of sums up how I feel about New York dealers – not other dealers, New York dealers. The letter said, "Dear Courbet, you promised to give me paintings with deer in them, and the paintings you sent have no deer in them. Where are the deer?" In French. [Laughs.] So there. I mean, I think that is very much when economics are involved. In other words, people wanted the hunting scenes, the deer, and the – and it was hard for them to absorb what was almost an abstract painting of a forest or a wave.

Anyway, so when I started to really study Chinese art and the process, I was –

MS. RICHARDS: Chinese and Japanese?

MS. STEIR: No. I abandoned Japanese very quickly, only used it to learn about modernism, but not as an inspiration. It's a little too rigid for me. But when I looked – started to really look and study the spirit of

calligraphy - well, that was Japanese - the spirit of calligraphy infected the spirit of my work totally. At that time, I became a meditator.

MS. RICHARDS: What year - when was that? After this '84 -

MS. STEIR: Yeah. It was about '89 to '90. And so the show I had - I had two important shows, to me, of those paintings, the first one with my young friend Massimo Audiello, in a gallery he had on Greene Street, and the second one, two years later with Robert Miller. And that was really a turning point in my work and in my painting. Two years later, I think in '94, I had painted *The Waterfall* [1988-91] - I called them Waterfall paintings because -

The late '80s. But the real one, the totally free ones, were the early '90s. Some critics hated them, and some loved them. And there they stand to this day. Some people hate them, and some people love them. It's like - I can't tell if more people love them than hate them, but - because people tell you the most outrageous things. They just walk up to you and say, you know, "Are you Pat Steir? I love your work." Or, "Are you Pat Steir? Your work makes me sick." They'll say anything, especially at an opening.

MS. RICHARDS: That is remarkable.

MS. STEIR: Didn't anybody ever tell you that before?

MS. RICHARDS: I've never heard of people walking up and saying something extremely rude at an opening.

MS. STEIR: Yeah. They do. Both ways. It goes both ways -

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: - extremely flattering or extremely rude.

MS. RICHARDS: So that brings up the question of how your work has been received critically - I mean, not by those people, but I mean real critics. [Laughs.]

MS. STEIR: No.

MS. RICHARDS: How has that evolved over time? Have you felt that - have you understood the reactions? Did they connect with -

MS. STEIR: Well, I think -

MS. RICHARDS: - the reality that you felt was with what was going on with your work?

MS. STEIR: No.

MS. RICHARDS: I mean, did you feel the critics have universally understood or misunderstood or been mixed?

MS. STEIR: I think that criticism now is not based on any of that.

MS. RICHARDS: What do you think it's based on?

MS. STEIR: Connections.

MS. RICHARDS: Critics writing in order to connect themselves in a certain way to the art world?

MS. STEIR: Or the art world courting critics. Dealers. Dealers with power get - I think it's publicity now. Now it's about publicity. So the more critical attention you get, the more you get - because artists have publicists now, and dealers have publicists.

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MS. STEIR: So it's not a clear criticism. It's not a clear reaction. What's written may have nothing to do with the reaction, so you get the reaction from the public, from the collectors.

MS. RICHARDS: And that's changed since - in the '70s, you think that - or in the '80s -

MS. STEIR: I didn't understand. I didn't know what was - in the '80s, I think it started, artists with publicists, and dealers with publicity departments. I think it changed in the mid-'80s - with the superstar system in the '80s. Certainly the minimalists didn't have a publicist. The pop artists publicized themselves. And it just - the system now is like the movie system, the star system. It always was, but there were only 10 people before. Now there

are hundreds and hundreds of people. And so – well, I don't have a publicist, and unfortunately, neither does Cheim & Read. However, everything I do gets sold, and to museums. So –

MS. RICHARDS: You don't need a publicist.

MS. STEIR: I don't need a publicist. So it's an – I'm sure there are many people with a similar career.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] Changing the subject a little bit to your artistic process and how that's evolved over the years, it's a long time. Where to start? Maybe you can just – how have you approached the development of your work, the actual physical production? If you've had assistance, when? If not, why not, or why? And up until –

MS. STEIR: Okay. From the beginning, I had somebody who helped me stretch and prime canvases. That was just from the beginning. One of my first assistants was Amy Sillman. She was a student and assistant of mine.

MS. RICHARDS: That must have been in the '80s?

MS. STEIR: No. In the '70s. [Whispers. Inaudible.] Because of when the work got seen first, actually. So she was a great companion. I've always had somebody. Not every day. Now I have somebody who comes two days a week. I wish he would come more, because the paintings have gotten bigger and bigger. I paint the paintings. Nobody else can do that. But he stretches canvases. He helps me do the underpaintings and mixes paint. I have a very clear – to get my paintings to look the way they look, I have clear formulas for mixing the paint. Each layer has to be mixed differently. Even though the recent – the last paintings look black and white, they're different colors of black and different colors of white. So those colors are mixed colors.

MS. RICHARDS: You've always been careful about your techniques, in terms of the durability, the lasting quality.

MS. STEIR: Yeah. I am. When – I am, yes. I am. In the beginning I didn't know how, so some of those early paintings are very delicate. But once I knew how, I stuck to it. [Laughs.] My painting is like – it is like a performance, what I do. And I'm about to, myself, make a videotape of – I made one, but it's not good quality – of the process, the performance, because a lot of it – what I realized is the best part of the painting is the painting of it, is the act of painting it, and the thought that goes into every layer of paint – there are many layers – and the time I take between layers to contemplate or meditate on what's going to be done.

MS. RICHARDS: The assistants you've used, you mentioned Amy Sillman. Have they always been artists?

MS. STEIR: Mostly printers, because a printer is trained to not change what you ask them, just do what you ask them to do. Not comment on the quality of what you've done. Not saying, "Oh, that looks great," or "That doesn't look great." Printers hold back. They do what the artist wants to do. So most of my assistants have – a major assistant I had was a girl named Kathleen McShane, who was a printer. And McShane, M-C-S-H-A-N-E. She was a printer. She's an artist, but she also was a printer. So printing is very – I wanted somebody who could participate, and never think it was their work.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MS. STEIR: And I mean by "never think it was their work," to be able to participate wholeheartedly without giving an opinion and without saying, "You ought to do this. Oh, why don't you put" – and now I have somebody named Shaun – S-H-A-U-N, he spells it – Acton, A-C-T-O-N, and he's been with me for seven years. But he's an artist, and he doesn't work full-time for me. I would do anything to get him to work an extra day. Before the last show I had, he did work an extra day for six months to help me get ready, but it was a sacrifice, so.

MS. RICHARDS: So now it's two days a week?

MS. STEIR: It's two days a week. And so one of the things is that I'm getting older, and you climb up and down a 12-foot ladder all day. And so instead of the extra day, he said, "Why don't you get a scissor lift?" Because he can do what I need in two days, but then I need somebody in case I fall to call 911. That's a little – I like to be alone.

MS. RICHARDS: Will you get a lift?

MS. STEIR: Yeah. I'm going to get a lift.

MS. RICHARDS: And that's to help you, to keep you from having to climb up and down this 12-foot ladder as much – when you [inaudible].

MS. STEIR: Well, it's not to keep me from – it's good to climb up and down. The problem is, what if I step back to look and I'm alone in the room?

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: I never have [knocks wood], but I might, you know. You never know. I'm absent-minded. So I've always had somebody help me. He stretches – he can stretch an 18-foot-square canvas by himself.

MS. RICHARDS: Wow.

MS. STEIR: He's very good. He's an athlete. He does –

MS. RICHARDS: How tall are your ceilings in your studio?

MS. STEIR: Thirteen [feet].

MS. RICHARDS: So you really can't have an 18-foot –

MS. STEIR: Well, I can, because I rent another space or use a friend's space. Or sometimes – before they filled up my building – it was empty for a long time – they let me use a 20-foot-high place on the top floor.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you been contacted by museums to obtain the kind of information they need in terms of conservation of your work and the materials you used? Is that –

MS. STEIR: Well, I was just interviewed by Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, who's really – do you know her?

MS. RICHARDS: No, but I know of her.

MS. STEIR: She's the top conservator anywhere.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: And I'm lucky enough to have her as a friend. And she just interviewed me.

MS. RICHARDS: I was thinking of that video being useful to museums on your work and your processes.

MS. STEIR: Yeah. That's what she hopes. That's why she does it, for that, not for personal use, but for –

MS. RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] So the materials that you've used have slowly evolved over time, the painting materials?

MS. STEIR: They – the quality is better because I know more.

MS. RICHARDS: You started out using oils?

MS. STEIR: Always oils.

MS. RICHARDS: You never used acrylics?

MS. STEIR: Never used acrylics. Once I did, but they're harder to – they're very hard for me to use, because when you put the color on, it doesn't look the same as when it dries.

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MS. STEIR: And it's very hard. I like to see what I'm doing. I know people make beautiful paintings with them, but –

MS. RICHARDS: Have you changed your approach to oils as we've learned more about the health problems, the health issues?

MS. STEIR: I haven't.

MS. RICHARDS: With turpentine and all?

MS. STEIR: I use Turpenoid, which is supposed to be a lower thing. No, I haven't. I have good ventilation. I have a mask, which I don't wear. I lost a lung.

MS. RICHARDS: Because of this?

MS. STEIR: Well, who knows? I was a smoker, a light smoker. It could be that. It could be this. But as the doctor said, "It's what you do." You know, you make a certain –

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. STEIR: So I have good ventilation. I have eight windows that are always open on the river. Three fans in the ceiling. I don't have a ventilation system because the molecules are too heavy to lift out, and it would have to come down between – it would have to be a tube between me and the painting, so – me and the painting wall.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh. Yeah. Yeah. So you've always been using oil and oil painting mediums for these different layers?

MS. STEIR: I don't – yeah. I don't – in the beginning, yes. Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: No water-based? It's all oils?

MS. STEIR: All oil-based. But I don't use too many different things. It looks like I do, but I don't. I don't use varnishes. I basically just use oil and vinegar. Oil and turpentine.

MS. RICHARDS: You were talking about the different mixtures required, the different formulas for the different layers. What are those?

MS. STEIR: They're different weights of oil and different amounts of oil to turpentine, like salad dressing.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, okay. The pigment, the oil paint, you're using is the same?

MS. STEIR: No. It's never the same. Every pigment has a different weight.

MS. RICHARDS: But I meant the brand or the –

MS. STEIR: No. I use several different brands. I use Schmincke. Old Holland. Blockx. Schmincke, Old Holland, and Blockx.

MS. RICHARDS: Depending on the color?

MS. STEIR: The color and the weight, because one of the things with my – people say I use resist technique. No, nothing like that. Different colors – if you mix two colors together, one is heavier than the other. So one sinks to the back, and the other rises forward. So if you know which is which, you can control the color, and you know what amount. And that's all experience. That's not – you know what amount of what color affects it so it'll look like what color. But I could never do that with acrylic, because I wouldn't know how. It's too late for me and acrylic. But with oil paint, I know a lot about the paint itself. And for me, that's half the fun of it, is mixing the paint.

MS. RICHARDS: And do you enjoy the connection to the Old Masters and to the history of oil painting?

MS. STEIR: That's my thing. [Laughs.] I mean, that's the thing. That's the romance of the smell of the oil. The romance of oil painting is my thing. The romance of art history, the history of painting, is my thing. It's like in the last show – I mean, for the last show, it didn't get big reviews. But I got love letters from three major museum directors. I mean, not love letters, but how much they loved the work.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Very gratifying.

MS. STEIR: And so it was – and museum sales. And that's not for the money, you know. That's really something I want. I want them to be in museums for people to see.

MS. RICHARDS: Sure. You talked a lot about the different – influences and impact, that had impact on your work, the study of art history, the Chinese painting. What about the work of your peers? Did that play a role in the development of your work?

MS. STEIR: Not consciously. But – you're part of your own time. And although many, many of my friends are performers and dancers and poets, there are enough painters and sculptors to go around. And the female painters, like Elizabeth and Susan Rothenberg, and some younger ones like Julie Mehretu and Amy Sillman, are traditional painters.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MS. STEIR: They're just traditional painters. They play around with the form, but they paint in a traditional way. My –

MS. RICHARDS: You mentioned all women, didn't you?

MS. STEIR: Well, most of the painters in my generation were women.

MS. RICHARDS: And even Julie, though, coming up -

MS. STEIR: I mentioned her because she bought a print of mine. I liked her. I met her a while ago and like her. I don't know her very well. I only met her once, and we only talked about frizzy hair. So - [laughs] - because she's half Polish and African. So she has that frizzy Polish-Jewish hair, more than African hair. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: So that's what we discussed. But I admire her work. But it seems like a lot of the young painters are women, too. She's an abstract painter, so I'm more drawn to it than - I'm not really so drawn to contemporary figurative work. Basically, when I stopped doing figurative work, besides the Brueghel [series], painting flowers, when I stopped painting people - I think of my work as figurative. [Laughs.] Not this past show, but the Waterfall paintings. I call them Waterfall [paintings].

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: And I thought what -

MS. RICHARDS: Maybe the word "representational" rather than "figurative"?

MS. STEIR: Yeah, because I thought using the icon of minimalism, the single - of abstraction, the single brushstroke, and letting it make a picture itself - was the ultimate image painting.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MS. STEIR: They look like waterfalls. And when you reduce them to the, you know, they look like a miniature. So I always hung on, until the last show, to that. The last show was a conversation with Barnett Newman - not inspiration, not going back to - it was Barnett Newman and then, good-bye. It was a good-bye. It was an homage and a good-bye.

MS. RICHARDS: And why did that come up at this point in time, Barnett Newman?

MS. STEIR: Because I've always loved Barnett Newman's work and Rothko's work. And so I never dared to publicly play off of it and bid it good-bye. But it's good-bye because I don't touch the canvas. I pour the paint. They're all poured. So that's my - one of my rules. You pour the paint. [Laughs.] You don't touch the canvas. You pour or throw paint. You put each color on separately. Don't blend colors. So I have my set of rules that I stick to, limitations more than rules.

MS. RICHARDS: When did those come into being?

MS. STEIR: When I started the Waterfall paintings.

MS. RICHARDS: In the late '80s?

MS. STEIR: Late '80s. About '89, '88.

MS. RICHARDS: So it's been almost 20 years.

MS. STEIR: Almost 20 years of not painting brushstrokes with the tip of a brush.

MS. RICHARDS: That was a major shift. Did you feel that was a major shift when it happened?

MS. STEIR: It was, but I didn't think so. I was thinking more about antimodernism, but -

MS. RICHARDS: And postmodernism?

MS. STEIR: Well, antimodernism.

[They laugh.]

MS. RICHARDS: Okay.

MS. STEIR: Though these look like modernist paintings, you know, and minimalist paintings. But I was thinking about antimodernism. Yes, you could call it postmodernism. I was thinking, is there postmodernism? Is there such a thing? And now, with the art that's being done now, it's hard to say there is.

I mean, architects have given it a good try. No more rectangular buildings, that's a relief. I look out my window from my studio and see all these rectangles and that beautiful Frank Gehry building on the highway, and it's like a bride. It's so beautiful. And at night, it has this row of windows and the row of light from the traffic, and I think, well, he did [it]. He really - it's such a relief, not a rectangle. But I'm not sure.

In dance, it's gone backwards from Cage. Nobody's gone forward from Cage and Yvonne Rainer. I mean, a little bit Bill Forsythe has. He's made a more postmodern dance. He's beloved in Europe, and nobody in America likes it. I don't think - it's hard for him to come back here, I mean, to raise the money to - and he's the only one who's tried to push to use what [Merce] Cunningham brought and to push past it. Yvonne, of course, did, but it didn't become a movement. And now Trisha Brown is just making ballets, old-fashioned ballets. And she's developed a - instead of this, this, just an attitude similar to the Russian ballet. Not the same, but different. And so nobody's really pushed past that into a modernist form.

And I went to see - I love the New Museum [New York City], and I love Lisa Phillips. But a young friend of mine who works in a bookstore said - young, very young, said, I mean, in her 20s - said, "It's really a stretch." And I said, "No. It's really Tuttle and Rauschenberg. It's not a stretch for me.

MS. RICHARDS: Rauschenberg is sheer curtains?

MS. STEIR: Yeah. They show it there, and also the stuff around, you know. So you stick a radio on a painting. Well, he did that when I was a baby, before I'd even painted.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: And then the best piece there is this - it's something that looks like a Tuttle. And there's one piece that's, I've found, excellent. It looks like a kite with little drawings all over it. I can't say it was a stretch, but it was excellent. And of course, you know -

MS. RICHARDS: On view right now?

MS. STEIR: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Whose work?

MS. STEIR: I don't know. Somebody I don't know. I didn't even look for the name. Very good. I don't remember it. So it didn't - I mean, Nancy Spero's piece on the wall, of course, is beautiful. But we know that. So, not a stretch. So I don't know what to think of the newest work I see. I want to be shocked, you know, the way that Pop art made people angry and upset, or every movement makes people angry and upset except postmodernism. That makes people cozy and comfortable in art. In painting and sculpture, I should say, not in - because I don't think it's there in performance except for one. Oh, of course, Joan Jonas, who's fabulous.

MS. RICHARDS: When you're talking about young people, some artists say they stay connected by continuing to teach in some way. You stopped teaching when you left CalArts. Have you ever taught again, either on a regular basis or intermittently?

MS. STEIR: My problem - I have a fabulous student right now. My problem is it's so exhausting to teach. It's really exhausting because there's so many people who want something in one room.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: I had an assistant this January named Martha Tuttle who - when the Tuttles came to New York, they lived with us here. And so Martha was a little girl then. And now she's in her first year at Bard [Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY]. And she came - she wanted to be in a painting class. It was more advanced. It wasn't for first-year students. And so she worked with me to learn for the month. And it was like working with a sponge. I mean, she's so gifted, it's unbelievable. And so she mixed paints, she stretched canvases, and she - I talked about mediums and so forth. And then I wrote a letter recommending her to the painting class, and she got in. And I like a student like that. And interns are sort of students.

MS. RICHARDS: So you have interns also?

MS. STEIR: I have interns. And studio assistants are students because they're always younger.

MS. RICHARDS: So you haven't taken on a permanent position?

MS. STEIR: I would if I could choose the students. But they don't let you. It's against - [laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Is it also teaching would be difficult because you travel, because you move back and forth?

MS. STEIR: Well, that's true. That's the other thing. I travel with my work. Like this year, I had the show at Cheim & Read, and then I had four other shows in different places. And it would be hard to teach. I did, after CalArts, teach at the School of Visual Arts [New York City]. They fired me three times.

MS. RICHARDS: Why?

MS. STEIR: Because I traveled too much. And I don't want to teach out of town. The Baltimore museum school, the Baltimore school [Maryland Institute, College of Art] of – what is that? – called me and asked me if I could come and do crits for three days, and I said, "Why don't you bring your students to my studio instead?" And so they're trying to do that.

MS. RICHARDS: The students would bring their work in some way?

MS. STEIR: No. They wouldn't bring anything. We'd just talk. I don't think that it's good – oh, that's the other thing. I don't like to criticize student work because it's like, what do I know? What if that student really has something new, and I don't like it? And that's just an opinion, you know. That's the same as criticism in the newspaper, you know. Yuck, I don't like pink, so – what does that matter?

MS. RICHARDS: Does this go back to any thoughts you had when you were an art student and –

MS. STEIR: No. When I was teaching, my first teaching job at Parsons [Parsons School of Design, New York City]. See that drawing up there, with the smear in it? I had a student who smeared everything, a little boy, very quiet, not so clean-looking. He would do this [demonstrates]. And I always felt like I should – yuck. I didn't say anything to him. I never said "Yuck," because I thought, what if he's a genius? What if – you know, you never know. What's unfamiliar can look awful to you. Or if somebody's constantly doing something – so I did that drawing in honor of him with a smear in it, a line and a smear. You never know. You can really destroy somebody with negative criticism.

MS. RICHARDS: But you didn't have that experience when you were a student? You were a teacher, but you had the feeling you received unjustified criticism or –

MS. STEIR: Yes – all the girls received unjustified criticism. Pats on the behind. Pats on the head. You know, it wasn't personal. It was the usual.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. STEIR: My work in school was not like anyone else's in school. I was always kind of the mysterious student, you know, the nerdy – well, maybe it's – people treated me, in fact, the way I want to treat students.

MS. RICHARDS: Hmm. With respect, in a way?

MS. STEIR: With at least respect for like, what is she up to? I was a very good academic student, and so I could gain that other respect.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MS. STEIR: And I had some teachers who were either indifferent or encouraging. And some – I mentioned the printmaking student teacher who was so condescending, to girls in general. Like, he told not me but one girl, "Maybe you should go home and learn knitting."

MS. RICHARDS: This was at Pratt?

MS. STEIR: Yeah. At Pratt.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember the teacher's name?

MS. STEIR: Jacob Landau. He's dead now. It was Jacob Landau. He was so condescending. And he's the one that later so sweetly brought his class to – he was a printmaking – he taught printmaking.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you ever contemplate getting a graduate degree?

MS. STEIR: Yes, but – not in art. When I met my husband, I was thinking of going to Columbia [Columbia University, New York City] for – I was working on *Semiotext(e)*, and I was going up there all the time. It was a nonpaid job, but the magazine came out of Columbia. And I was thinking of trying to get a degree in comparative literature, a graduate degree at Columbia. I was riding my bike up there every day from Mulberry Street, and I was seeing a psychoanalyst on 87th Street named Phyllis Greenacre, who was a kind of – one of the early – one of that group of women, with Karen Horney and so forth, who rewrote [Sigmund] Freud, the first

active rewrite of Freud. She was 40 years old when Freud died, so she was 84 when I started treatment with her. I was her last patient. I convinced her to – one other artist was her patient, but I can't say who. Probably – but she changed my life. But she was up near Columbia, too – [laughs] – so I thought, well, I could go there in the morning and go work at the *Semiotext(e)* a little bit and then go take classes. But then I met Joost [Elffers], and I was going to give up painting.

MS. RICHARDS: You were?

MS. STEIR: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: You were? You were going to give up painting? When was that?

MS. STEIR: In the late '70s. '78.

MS. RICHARDS: Joost is spelled –

MS. STEIR: J. J-O-O-S-T.

MS. RICHARDS: Joost.

MS. STEIR: And Joost's mother was an artist, a photographer, and she was famous in Holland. And, well, he loved to live with a woman artist. [Laughs.] And so he said, "You can't give up painting."

MS. RICHARDS: In the late '70s, you had achieved some success. You had –

MS. STEIR: Yes. But you always give – you always fight with something you love. You fight with your husband. You fight with your children. Why not fight with painting?

MS. RICHARDS: So you threatened to give it up?

MS. STEIR: I threatened to give it up. But then I was easily convinced not to. And then that's when I started the Brueghel painting, that research into painting.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that – did you remember the experience as a kind of a crisis in your work?

MS. STEIR: Yes, it was.

MS. RICHARDS: And a lack of self-confidence?

MS. STEIR: No. It wasn't exactly like self-confidence. It's like, well, okay. If that's the way you feel. It was as though – [laughs] – the paintings were living things. Well, if you're so uncooperative, then I'm going to go away. I'm very stupid in that way. I'm a stupid fighter.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it a question of, I have to believe that I'm doing something that's really historically important in order to take my time to do it? Was it a kind of a judgment you were making about the importance of what you were doing?

MS. STEIR: I don't know. I really don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: How long did that crisis last?

MS. STEIR: I would say six months. Not too long. It wasn't too long. I like to work. That's the problem. I mean, I like to make paintings. I like to work at making paintings. So what happened is it happened. It was part of that whole postmodern crisis that I had. It was a crisis.

MS. RICHARDS: Did it have to do with critics saying painting was dead?

MS. STEIR: No. I never cared – I lived with a person who said –

MS. RICHARDS: Sol?

MS. STEIR: Yeah. And then he would say to people, "Oh, look at Pat's paintings. They're wonderful." And I had to say, "Please stop. Don't do that. You program them to hate it." But he only meant – he didn't mean my painting – [laughs] – or he didn't mean painting at all, you know. He collected a lot of paintings.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. Yes. So Joost convinced you to continue painting?

MS. STEIR: Yeah. Yeah. But it was easy to convince me. It was more like a family fight.

MS. RICHARDS: Has that ever happened again?

MS. STEIR: No, because what happened is, when I did the Brueghel painting, I opened up a nest of ideas, endless, for two lifetimes. I could go on now for two lifetimes. Maybe I had come to a crisis of thought. I couldn't think where to go.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MS. STEIR: I couldn't see – but now, when I did that, when I did the Brueghel painting, with the 84 panels, I opened up enough questions, enough questions to solve in painting for a lifetime. With the last paintings, it wasn't an influence of Newman. It was an homage and a good-bye to that painting, that kind of way of thinking. And if you look at the paintings, really look – you have to know modernism to look. You can't just look. You have to know modernism to look.

And it's like – a dealer I work with is involved with a major museum. Her boyfriend is a major museum director in Europe. And she said, "He called me from New York to tell me the paintings were beautiful." You have to know modernism to know that they were a good-bye. And that's why so many museum directors loved it, because they're historians.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] When Charlotta organized that exhibition, did she write extensively, or did someone else write extensively, about –

MS. STEIR: It's been written about really a lot, in a lot of magazines and journals. She wrote a very nice – every place that did it made some kind of little catalogue. They were very low budget, if you remember. She made a foldout –

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: – that's very nice. And I somewhere have a copy of it. But it was very nice, my notes and her notes. And it was very good.

MS. RICHARDS: I'm just going to change disks.

[END MD 01 TR 03.]

Pat Steir, disk four.

All right. Did we finish talking about those questions? Should we start a new subject? We were talking about 1979, the crisis. And you've done a lot of traveling. Has traveling – have any of those travels been important to you as an artist? And –

MS. STEIR: All of them.

MS. RICHARDS: Being somewhere else. And what are the –

MS. STEIR: I think that somewhere else gets into the work, always. You don't know it. It's not conscious. But the light and the color and the food – I think everything.

MS. RICHARDS: You talked about Rome, taking paintings from Rome.

MS. STEIR: Doing paintings in Rome. The only places I've worked – I've worked in Japan making prints, woodcuts, and I've worked in China making woodcuts. But, of course, when you make woodcuts, the printer's hand, especially in Japan and China – here it's neutral. The printer keeps a neutral hand. In Japan and China, they're half of it. Here, the printer, it's a good printer, or it's not a good printer. They have a style you like of printing, or they don't. But the hand remains neutral. In China, you send them a drawing, and then they make a cut of it. They cut the wood.

MS. RICHARDS: By eye or by computer?

MS. STEIR: Who knows? They cut – the Chinese – the Japanese cut each color on a different woodblock and –

MS. RICHARDS: You're not doing the cutting yourself on the woodblock?

MS. STEIR: They do it. No. The Japanese do every color on a different block of wood. They trace the sketch. It's a traditional means. And then they register it with, you know, two Xs in the corner of the paper and in a corner of the wood, and they tack it down, and then they rub it and print it. So it's very methodical, and you can see what they do.

In China, they put every brushstroke on a little tiny piece of wood. And when they print it, they scramble the wood, like that. Somehow – I don't know how they know where to put every brushstroke, because some pictures have hundreds of drops of paint and brushstrokes. And they pour a different color of paint on every stroke, really one, two, three, lickety-split, very fast, they rub it, and they hold it up. And I said, "That doesn't look like my sketch I sent you, my drawing," a really careful watercolor. And they said, "Better. Right?" [Laughs.] Now, that's a lesson. And that's the difference between architecture in Japan and China, calligraphy in Japan and China, everything, the whole mentality.

MS. RICHARDS: So have you had a successful print done in China? And why did you try to print in China in the first place?

MS. STEIR: Kathan decided she wanted to – Kathan Brown from Crown Point Press decided she wanted to know about China. We became such good friends over the years that I became – I was the first person she took to Japan and the first person she took to China, because we like to travel together.

MS. RICHARDS: And she didn't want to do woodcuts in her own studio in San Francisco?

MS. STEIR: Well, she wanted to go Japan and China. She wanted to do traditional woodcuts rather than – it's very hard to cut wood. And so if you cut it yourself, it's different than a classical, traditional woodcut that's cut by a master and printed by a master.

MS. RICHARDS: So you've had a successful experience with woodcuts in Japan?

MS. STEIR: And China. I think they –

MS. RICHARDS: How did you get to a successful point in China, when they had this –

MS. STEIR: I agreed. It was better. [Laughs.] Since I like to embrace the chaos of accident, I thought, why not?

MS. RICHARDS: And they are able to print that same image in that way so that the prints are consistent?

MS. STEIR: They're never – no. No, they're not.

MS. RICHARDS: So the edition is not the traditional identical, or close to identical?

MS. STEIR: Yeah. Yeah. No, it's not. But no edition is really identical. They all have differences. Slight, but –

MS. RICHARDS: And what about other travels that you've done?

MS. STEIR: India. Color and light. Color and light. Look at that.

MS. RICHARDS: In what circumstances have you been to India?

MS. STEIR: Is that not India, the couch and the painting?

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Why don't you identify what painting you're pointing to.

MS. STEIR: The red, yellow, and green painting.

MS. RICHARDS: The title? The title is – and the date?

MS. STEIR: It's a Roman series [1993]. I actually did it in Rome, but it's Indian. Things get in, not only the light of the place you're in, but everything. The atmosphere, the smell, it all gets into the work. And people can deny it. I always denied it. I said, "No, the tubes have names. I use the tube." These are – these particular colors in that painting are straight from the tube. But they look – if I took them to Rome, they would disappear, they would be so Roman. I exhibited them in Rome. But they look very Indian, too, because the color and light of India is –

MS. RICHARDS: When did you first go to India?

MS. STEIR: Not so – maybe – mid-'80s, I think.

MS. RICHARDS: What prompted you to go then?

MS. STEIR: Curiosity. I went; Joost and I went.

MS. RICHARDS: Just the two of you?

MS. STEIR: Yeah. We visited Lynda Benglis's husband, Anand Sarabhai. But I didn't want to be – you know, he

invited artists to come and workshop, but they had to leave their work. And I explained to Anand, if he bought the painting, I could have a house next door to his, and that I wasn't going to paint in his studio or leave the work. But we are friends, so we drove around India with him.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you been subsequently -

MS. STEIR: Back to India. And we wanted to go now, but now it's too hot for us. We wanted to go this year, but I had - my husband had a lot of work, and I had a lot of work, so we couldn't go.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you have a studio in Europe?

MS. STEIR: I did in Amsterdam, but no longer, no. I strictly work just here.

MS. RICHARDS: When you had a separate studio, did you do a different kind of work in each place?

MS. STEIR: No. I carried the work - that's how - I carried - I did the Brueghel series that way, carrying it back and forth.

MS. RICHARDS: What years did you have the studio in Amsterdam as well as in New York?

MS. STEIR: I guess from the time we got married until maybe 1990.

MS. RICHARDS: What year did you get married?

MS. STEIR: Or lived together. I think '78 or '79. I'm very bad with dates.

MS. RICHARDS: So more than 10 years, you went back and forth with your work?

MS. STEIR: Yeah. Yeah. But it didn't seem like so long, because I didn't do it all the time. Some years I didn't work there at all. And for a few years, I worked steadily there. I painted part of the Brueghel series there and part here, and -

MS. RICHARDS: And the Waterfall - those paintings started there?

MS. STEIR: I did some of -

MS. RICHARDS: Maybe. I mean, those are the years.

MS. STEIR: I did them both places. They started in New York, in my studio on Wooster Street, and then I did some there as well. Probably the - I see a difference in the way the Amsterdam ones look than here, not in form but in color, even though they're black and white - [laughs] - and the color of white and the color of black. The light in Amsterdam is a white light. There is no yellow in it at all. So in the white, I have more yellow than I have here in this yellow light. I didn't put as much yellow into the white.

MS. RICHARDS: And you've traveled in Japan and China?

MS. STEIR: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Over the years, or just -

MS. STEIR: Japan, several - I think I went to Japan three times or four times, twice to work with Kathan and once to have a show. Three times. Once for an exhibition. The first trip with Kathan was poetic. We went alone. We didn't know what to expect. We stayed in a monastery that took travelers, and they wouldn't let us have the beautiful rooms because we were Westerners, so our room was all plastic in case we spilled our food. And we had to stay in the same room. They wouldn't give us two rooms, because we were traveling together. And we didn't want to share a room because I walk around the room all night, and she snores. And like that. And we took a bath in the men's bath by mistake. Oh, we did everything wrong. And then on the second trip, we knew, and we stayed in the Tararyan [ph], the fanciest hotel in Japan, for a month, for a long time. Very -

MS. RICHARDS: Did you meet artists in Japan?

MS. STEIR: Yes, we did.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that -

MS. STEIR: I went with Kathan to Japan twice, so I guess I've been in Japan four times. But - yes, we met artists, and they took us around. And the printer that I was working with at her shop was Japanese-born, living in San Francisco. So he came back as translator, to work with the woodcutter and the printer. And then he took us to -

we went to artists' studios, and one or two of the artists Kathan continued to work with in New York. In China I didn't meet any artists. I was in China before Tiananmen Square, so any Chinese artists – I became good friends with Chen Sin, a Chinese artist, but I met him in France.

MS. RICHARDS: And over the years, you've talked about your relationships with some very – well, peers of yours who have maintained careers over this whole period of time, and someone like Agnes Martin. It's so difficult to be an artist and to keep going. If you were giving advice to a young artist, what would you say is the most important things that kept you going and kept you – continuing to pursue your work in the face of all the difficulties? And because we all know that of the hundreds and hundreds of artists who graduate from art school, very few really continue. And so it's kind of two-sided: what do you think keeps them going, and what kept you going?

MS. STEIR: Probably the same thing kept us all going: the work, making the work. I have a young nephew, 18 years old. He wants to be an artist. My brother was a psychoanalyst. He's not – probably wanted to be an artist himself and didn't do it, got afraid how hard it is, like – as my father did.

MS. RICHARDS: This is part of my question.

MS. STEIR: Yeah. And my young nephew said to me – I didn't know him; I only just met him, and he's 18. He said to me, "Was it worth it?" And I said, "Worth what?" [Laughs.] He said – well, because it's been built up to him how hard it was for me. But I'll tell you, it was easier for me than working in an office, easier for me than teaching, easier for me than sitting in a room day after day with neurotics telling me – I would lose my patience doing any of that. I couldn't be able to do it. This was the easiest thing for me to do.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that another way of saying it's the only thing you could do?

MS. STEIR: No. I could do a lot of things. I could run a big company. But I would hate it. I could have – let's see. I couldn't have been a ballerina or a pianist. But I could have been a decent journalist, maybe not great but decent. A decent poet. But this is what I wanted to do, and so it became – because I wanted to do it, what I could have been doesn't count. This is what I wanted to do, and I did it because I wanted to do it. And long ago, I had to be the best. I always had to be the best. But now that doesn't matter.

MS. RICHARDS: In the early years, when it was particularly difficult as a woman, not that that's so much easier, did your relationships with women artists help you continue?

MS. STEIR: I never thought of not – but the relationships with women artists – I didn't know there were women artists. I knew there was Joan Mitchell, but I didn't know her. I knew there were Mercedes Matter because she was a teacher, but she seemed nuts to me. She was. And I –

MS. RICHARDS: Did you know Hedda Sterne?

MS. STEIR: No. I met her later.

MS. RICHARDS: Lee Krasner?

MS. STEIR: Miani Johnson and I did a beautiful project we never finished. Miani adopted a child, and I went and got very busy. And I went into my own work in a very intense way. We interviewed, 10 years ago – 13 years ago – 14 years ago – we started interviewing women artists over 70. And we interviewed all of them. And I have them. Then we foolishly gave the disks away to a publisher, who went out of business and disappeared. So we don't have the disks. I have the hard copy of a lot of it. And I think –

MS. RICHARDS: Who did you interview?

MS. STEIR: We interviewed – I interviewed Louise Bourgeois, and that was published in *Artforum*. I've written about Louise five times. I interviewed Agnes Martin, and she only – *Aperture* – not *Aperture*, *Parkett* wanted to do the interview and publish, you know, pictures of her work and my work and us. And she didn't like the publisher of *Parkett*, the former publisher, and she wouldn't do it.

MS. RICHARDS: Who was that?

MS. STEIR: I can't remember his name, but she didn't like him. He did something she didn't like, not even to her; she just didn't like it. So she wanted it in *Artforum*. But then *Artforum* – I still have the interview – *Artforum* asked me if I would ask her about her sex life, and I said no. And they said – the then-editor, who wasn't a woman but a gay man, said, "We'll send someone with you." And I said, "Absolutely not. That's it." I said, "Would you ask your grandmother, you know, about" –

MS. RICHARDS: Had that ever come up before in your life, that someone asked you about someone – I mean,

that -

MS. STEIR: Well, I was interviewing her, so they wanted - and I handed in the interview, and they said, "Just add this. Ask her if she's a lesbian or not." Well, that was such a toxic subject for Agnes, you know; I wouldn't have dared. And I wouldn't dare to this day put it in anything I wrote about her, though I think I'm going to find that interview and - anyway, we interviewed all - we interviewed Hedda Sterne. We interviewed almost everyone. Not -

MS. RICHARDS: Alice Neel?

MS. STEIR: Alice Neel.

MS. RICHARDS: Louise Nevelson had already died?

MS. STEIR: Yeah, had already died. Lee Krasner - had already died. But we got almost all of the others. You know, because Miani's mother was an art dealer of that generation, so it was -

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. Yes. [Inaudible].

MS. STEIR: I admired those women so much that we - the project happened that we did it together, because I started off on my own to do it, and Joan Simon said, "But Miani's doing the same thing. Why don't you work together?" But even working together, we never finished it. And now I don't know. And Miani and I had different ideas of how to get it published. Because I live with Joost, I think you have to hand the publisher a total package, edited, with pictures.

MS. RICHARDS: That's typical.

MS. STEIR: Now it's typical. Miani thought, oh, you just send a few pages and, you know, a description around. And she did do that, and it was turned down, and she lost steam. When she lost steam, I lost steam, because I got so invested in my work. But we can always do it. [Laughs.] I mean, we can find the material. I have a lot of the material in my studio in a box.

MS. RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Have you ever thought of curating an exhibition, either on a theme or a particular artist who you felt deserved to be seen?

MS. STEIR: I always think of it, but I don't act on it. I did once curate an exhibition in a little gallery around here, but -

MS. RICHARDS: But you've written about art.

MS. STEIR: Yeah. I love to write about art. I want to write - now, I wrote something that was published in an English magazine about Louise, her life as a fairy tale. I'll e-mail it to you, just for your own interest, starting -

MS. RICHARDS: What magazine was it?

MS. STEIR: It's a good one. *Art Review*, I think it's called. Yeah, yeah. *Art Review*. I think that's what -

MS. RICHARDS: How long ago was that?

MS. STEIR: Oh, last winter. I try to write something every few years. And now I'm interested in art, so it was Louise, parallel with a fairy tale as the innocent girl, the very sexual mature woman, the witch at the cave, and the old crone. And her work fit into all of those categories easily. I mean, her work gave me that. And, you know, she's really old. And Brigitte Cornand, the filmmaker, loves her and takes sometimes care of her. And Brigitte called me up and said that Louise loved the article so much she has her read it to her every night, like a fairy tale story. And then I went to see Louise. Louise is weak and tiny, but grand. And she -

Yes. And she still does marvelous drawings because she doesn't sleep. And so I went to visit Louise, and she got the computer, asked Brigitte to get me on the Internet, and then she made me read my bio out loud to her. Because we showed with a lot of the same dealers because I chose a lot of the dealers I showed with because they showed women artists. Xavier Fourcade showed Joan Mitchell and Louise Bourgeois. Robert Miller showed Joan Mitchell and Louise Bourgeois.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. STEIR: And John Cheim and Howard are sort of an offshoot of Miller. So I just - it's like I -

MS. RICHARDS: Right. And they continue to have a number of, you know -

MS. STEIR: Not a number, but maybe – they have –

MS. RICHARDS: Louise Fishman.

MS. STEIR: Louise. Louise.

MS. RICHARDS: Lynda.

MS. STEIR: Lynda. And me. I don't know of any other. Four. And they have 16 artists. When they take – yeah. Oh, there's another one, too. There is another woman. There are two other women who they show occasionally, not as regularly.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] Is it important to you that – well, as you said, you picked a gallery by their approach, their attitude, towards showing women artists.

MS. STEIR: Well, it meant that they would be open to me.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: I think as I get older, the male/female thing doesn't make as much of a difference.

MS. RICHARDS: But also, Cheim & Read has an obvious devotion to painting.

MS. STEIR: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: And that must be important, to feel comfortable in that kind of atmosphere of respect.

MS. STEIR: Well, that wasn't important to me, but it was important to them. [Laughs.] I mean, in other words, they were open to painting. But that came from Miller. And John Cheim chose most of the artists, okayed them, let's say, that Miller showed. So it's just a continuation of John Cheim's –

MS. RICHARDS: When you were at Miller, did you work with John, or did you work with Bob Miller?

MS. STEIR: Both. Both. Both.

MS. RICHARDS: At that point, Robert Miller was actively involved in the gallery?

MS. STEIR: When I started, he was actively involved with me. Bob was tricky. He left the gallery without telling anyone. He basically retired without an announcement. And so –

MS. RICHARDS: And he left Betsy, his wife, to run it?

MS. STEIR: Well, he wanted to close it, and Betsy wanted to keep it open. But suddenly she was there. But okay, she was there. He was still there. And it was like that. And then he was gone.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you there when Louise was there, too?

MS. STEIR: Just at the –

MS. RICHARDS: Louise Bourgeois.

MS. STEIR: Louise, sure. She was there the whole time. She was there before I was, or at the same time, because we just segued over from Miller. Nobody liked Betsy. She was inexperienced. It wasn't personal, but she was inexperienced with business. It was scary to turn a lifetime of work over to her. And she had a lot of animosity toward Bob and his choices. They had a very bad marriage, to say the least.

MS. RICHARDS: Now, do you – this is a – in terms of thinking about the future and your work and who will be the guardian of it –

MS. STEIR: I'm considering that now. I don't know yet what I'll do.

MS. RICHARDS: Do artists typically leave that in the hands of their galleries now?

MS. STEIR: I don't know what they do. No. They often choose other galleries and other people to do it. It's not a good idea to leave it in the hands of commercial judgment.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] You were talking about wanting to get back a lot of your work. Are you actually succeeding in doing that?

MS. STEIR: No. No. It's just a fantasy. But I have a show now in Oregon [sic, Sun Valley, ID], and it's of a – it's five paintings that were part of a panorama that I built in England for Biennale.

MS. RICHARDS: What year?

MS. STEIR: Must have been '91 or two.

MS. RICHARDS: The Venice Biennale?

MS. STEIR: No. It was a biennale in England. They started – they had two in a row – they did it twice, and then they didn't do it any more. Money, who knows.

MS. RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MS. STEIR: I built a panorama for it, and the panorama was the size of a – sketch of a panorama, so it was 15 feet in diameter, where you could stand on 15 feet of stuff. You came in from the bottom, just like an old Victorian panorama, and then when you got in, it had blue lights, so –

MS. RICHARDS: Curved?

MS. STEIR: Totally round.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: A total circle, 350 [sic] degrees. You came up into the center through a dark tunnel like the –

MS. RICHARDS: And the 15 feet was the diameter?

MS. STEIR: Yeah. And 10 paintings in a circle made – but seamless. They looked seamless.

MS. RICHARDS: What year did you make this?

MS. STEIR: Where is that book? It's not here any more. Somebody took my book. I think it was '81 or – no, '91 or '92.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MS. STEIR: And they're exhibiting in Oregon in a gallery, the paintings as separate paintings. All of them, as separate paintings. They were at Mass MOCA [Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, MA] as separate paintings, where they looked small because the building is so big. [Laughs.] You couldn't tell they were there. But somebody wanted to buy all five paintings, and I said no.

MS. RICHARDS: There are only five that went around in a whole circle?

MS. STEIR: Yeah, five, to make 15 feet.

MS. RICHARDS: Were the paintings curved?

MS. STEIR: They were stretched on a curve, but they were flat. They painted flat, but stretched on a curve. It was a seamless curve.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: And you couldn't see the separate –

MS. RICHARDS: So 360 degrees divided by five, so each is –

MS. STEIR: I think 11 feet.

MS. RICHARDS: – an 80 degree – whatever the curve would be.

MS. STEIR: Yeah, a shipbuilder built the building for me. I must have –

MS. RICHARDS: Where have those paintings been between 1990, early '90s, and now they're showing them in Oregon?

MS. STEIR: They were shown – they had several museum exhibits. It's very expensive to build the building. So they've been – you have to build the building.

MS. RICHARDS: Sure.

MS. STEIR: And to build the building, the building has to be very high, in fact, because it has to be on stilts to come through the tunnel. It could be outdoors, but it would be difficult. And then, you know, it needs electricity and so forth. And I composed music to be inside, so the sound of water music.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that the first time you ever composed music to go with your work?

MS. STEIR: Yes. The only time.

MS. RICHARDS: What is the music – is it piano music?

MS. STEIR: Water. No, water.

MS. RICHARDS: Digital –

MS. STEIR: No, water.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MS. STEIR: I went and recorded running water. And then it didn't sound like water, so I went to a studio, and then we made it sound like water. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: And who owns these paintings?

MS. STEIR: I do. But now they're for sale, and somebody wanted to buy all five. And I said no, because if I want to build a panorama again, I can always – I could probably borrow all five. And I think it's better that they're in the hands of separate people, so that it doesn't – you know, the person doesn't suddenly not like them and put them on auction.

MS. RICHARDS: What was your inspiration for creating a round painting?

MS. STEIR: I had been very sick, and I had an operation – not very sick; it turned out I wasn't very sick. But I had a big operation to prove I wasn't very sick. It looked like I had ovarian cancer, and so I had to have a big operation. I had it in Holland. And I brought a book of my work to the doctor to say, I can't have a hysterectomy. I need my hormones. [Laughs.] And in Holland – here, you know, they just do a hysterectomy. But in Holland, they don't. They don't. If it's cancer, they do what they have to, and if it isn't, they don't do anything. They just remove the – well, the tumor turned out not to be malignant, though in scans it looked like it could be.

But anyway, the operation makes you sick. So I had been in the hospital. And when I came out of the hospital, Joost, Marina Abramovic, and Ulli [ph] took me to Scheveningen – I can't say that word; it's Scheveningen – to see the panorama. And it was like – I was a little still woozy from not walking around so much. And I thought, I want to build a panorama. We'll go to –

MS. RICHARDS: Who did that panorama in Scheveningen?

MS. STEIR: It's a Victorian panorama. I don't know. Joost?

JOOST ELFFERS: Yes?

MS. STEIR: Who did the panorama in Scheveningen? I don't think it was –

MR. ELFFERS: It's the *Panorama Mesdag* [1881], [Hendrik Willem] Mesdag.

MS. STEIR: *Panorama Mesdag*, M-E-S-D-A-G.

MR. ELFFERS: And the painter is Mesdag. I don't know the first name. A 19th century painter of landscapes. A magical place.

MS. STEIR: And so I thought – no, no. It was nobody, you know. A nobody. But –

MR. ELFFERS: No. A famous Dutch local painter.

MS. STEIR: Okay. Oh, but I saw the [Edouard] Manets in Paris, the curved paintings.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, okay.

MS. STEIR: [Claude] Monet – no. It was –

MS. RICHARDS: And in Paris, the *Water Lilies* [1914-26].

MS. STEIR: Yeah. That's – and they were curved, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. STEIR: Yeah, that's what I saw.

MS. RICHARDS: It wasn't 360 degrees, though.

MS. STEIR: No. But you could take it there. And that was – maybe the two combined in my mind is [the] inspiration. And that's why I did it. But the important thing is that I don't want them to go as a group, anywhere.

MS. RICHARDS: So you're going to go out to Oregon because they're going to be installed or –

MS. STEIR: Yeah. Exactly. Now. They are. But I'm going to go next week, on the 15th. It's an art gallery named Ochi Gallery, and it's in Sun Valley, Ketchum. That's why people are interested. They're big. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Sun Valley, Idaho?

MS. STEIR: Yeah. Idaho. I'm sorry.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay. Where in [inaudible].

MS. STEIR: Idaho, not Oregon. Yeah. It's a private gallery. A huge space. Everything is big there, so somebody could really think of buying it.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think of Turrell, the circular experience and the –

MS. STEIR: It's different than Turrell. It's more tacky than Turrell. [They laugh.] You know, it's more handmade. But I don't think Turrell would like this.

MS. RICHARDS: So, going back to the initial question I had about your legacy, about the body of work, which is all over the world, and you own some yourself.

MS. STEIR: Yeah. And what I own myself. It's so hard to decide how, to decide what.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you spoken to your peers, and is there a lot of conversation about that? Or is it something nobody wants to talk about?

MS. STEIR: I've been talking about it with Carol LeWitt, Sol's wife, because she's just gone through that. She says, make a foundation and make a trust. Get trustees, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: You think of Rothko and what happened. [Laughs.]

MS. STEIR: Yeah. That doesn't – but something always happens. You can't control things after you're gone. But if you leave it in other – if you get reliable trustees, but who knows who is reliable in that situation? Then they can determine where to take it and who wants it and how to – when to change it. And I've also seen that, you know, because of Kiki, that Tony Smith – and Jane [wife of Tony Smith, Jane Lawrence Smith] did wonderful things just before she died. You know about that? She had pieces that had never been built before, but sketches had been shown.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MS. STEIR: The one that was just seen in L.A. MOCA [Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA].

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: She had them made. And some of them she gave away to museums where the director or curator had been very good to him. Others were sold. But she gave some away, had them built. And that was her goal – I think there were three of them – before she died, to do that, and she did it.

MS. RICHARDS: Right now what are you working on?

MS. STEIR: Right now I'm working on this giant print for Pace. And some monoprints, a group monoprints for the next art fair in Chicago.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think that it's a gradual evolution from just what you were recently doing? Do you foresee

a major shift of any sort?

MS. STEIR: It's hard to know right now because there's always that - in-between, like, what I think of as a major work, there's like a year of experiment, and then something evolves from the year of experiment.

MS. RICHARDS: When you're working on the print, do you go to the -

MS. STEIR: - shop every day? Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And it's an intensive experience that you're constantly working on yourself -

MS. STEIR: Yeah. It's very intense, yeah. Well, right now I'm working in my studio, making the negatives for them. And so I'm working in my studio.

MS. RICHARDS: How many layers will this big print be, 72 by 72?

MS. STEIR: A lot.

MS. RICHARDS: Etching?

MS. STEIR: No. It's a silk screen. But I can make a silk screen that looks like a lithograph. I can make a silk screen you don't know is a silk screen. It's not flat at all. It's very dimensional. And so it's very layered, extremely layered to be so dimensional, and very transparent.

MS. RICHARDS: Hmm. The inks are transparent that they're going to use?

MS. STEIR: The inks aren't transparent, but the paint is transparent. It looks like my paintings. In other words, they're very lacy.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] Have you done a silk-screen with that [inaudible] before?

MS. STEIR: Yeah. Several. Several. Several. But not that scale.

MS. RICHARDS: Ah. And is that going to be one image or a series of images?

MS. STEIR: It'll be one image that gets - one image I'll make to edition. And then I'll make three images to make monoprints from. So each print will be singular. I've done that with them before. So the proofing, you just continually proof, you continually print, and they become monoprints. And I draw and paint on top of them, paste things over them, hang things off them.

MS. RICHARDS: I haven't asked you about titling your work at all. What is your approach to titling now, and has it been consistent throughout your career?

MS. STEIR: No. Since the Waterfall paintings, I try to keep the titles to two words, sort of two-word poems that describe the image, so that when somebody says the two words, I can see the image. So two-word descriptive poems, like *Sea Storm* [2001]. *Night Sea* [2000-02]. *Night Sea* is a double title because Agnes Martin did a painting called *Night Sea*. So it's a -

MS. RICHARDS: Ah. It's an homage, as well.

MS. STEIR: Yeah. But only the title. The painting doesn't look like it. I mean, my painting is black, and hers is white.

MS. RICHARDS: So those paintings have those titles. But other works before those paintings?

MS. STEIR: No. Others came from poetry, not my own poetry.

MS. RICHARDS: And were those titles supposed to be descriptive in any way?

MS. STEIR: Yes. Always descriptive. Like *The Way to New Jersey*, the painting looks like a -

MS. RICHARDS: Visually descriptive?

MS. STEIR: Yeah. Visually descriptive. The painting looks like a map. But the quote is from - the quote came - that did, yes. They usually come while the work is being formed, while the image is being formed, what - the early paintings were often quotations of T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound or -

MS. RICHARDS: And that's where your work differs totally from the - minimalists and the -

MS. STEIR: Yeah. Yeah. Well, yeah, totally. And recently they were more simple.

MS. RICHARDS: Your titles?

MS. STEIR: Yeah. Like *Black and White* [1991]. *Black and Black* [date?]. *Black and Silver* [date?]. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: And the prints also are titled in your work that way, in a descriptive way?

MS. STEIR: Yeah. Very simple and descriptive, and like poetry.

MS. RICHARDS: How does your poetry relate to your paintings now?

MS. STEIR: I think they always paint a picture rather than - I've been trying to write a poem that describes a feeling, and it's not very good. They always paint a picture, though abstract, the way that I do in my painting.

MS. RICHARDS: Are there poets whose poetry you feel has inspired your poetry?

MS. STEIR: No. I'm sort of idiotic that way with my poetry. But I love the poetry of my friend Mei-mei Berssenbrugge and Anne Waldman. When I first read Ginsberg when I was, you know, 16, I couldn't believe it. Eighteen, I guess I was, when *Howl* [Allen Ginsberg. City Lights Books: San Francisco, 1956] came out.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. STEIR: I couldn't believe my - I was so happy. I loved it so much. I still love it. I love - I think my all-time favorite poem is "Kaddish" [Allen Ginsberg. Kraus Reprint Co.: Millwood, 1973], his poem "Kaddish." It's just so beautiful.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you also hear the other poets who - [Lawrence] Ferlinghetti and the other poets who were in his circle? Did you think about them when you were a painter?

MS. STEIR: Jack Kerouac. I once mistakenly sent Gary Snyder out to get me cigarettes. He looked like [laughs] the man washing dishes, you know, at a private dinner party where they had a caterer. I thought, oh, he's washing dishes. And he said okay. He went out, and he said, "Can I get some for myself, too?" I said, "Sure." [Laughs.] And then somebody told me who it was.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you ever friends with those poets?

MS. STEIR: No. I wish I was. They were here. And Anne Waldman, who's the same age I am, you know, knew them when she was just a baby, because she ran the St. Mark's Poetry Project. But I didn't. Barbara Guest is a great poet. To make something with words that's meaningful and abstract at the same time, I can't - is an incredible thing. I'm not so good at it, but I love the poets who are.

MS. RICHARDS: Are there any other facets of your career that we haven't touched on that you'd want [inaudible]?

MS. STEIR: I can't think of - I can't think. I'll think of it when you leave. Is there any other thing you can think of?

MS. RICHARDS: I think we've really touched on - everything that I had in mind. - I guess that's -

MS. STEIR: Yeah. I think the woman thing has been very hard. I always complain I don't get enough critical attention.

MS. RICHARDS: I think that that's continuing. Do you think that there's been improvement over your time, since the Guerrilla Girls and all kinds of changes have prompted -

MS. STEIR: There has been. But a few years ago, Anne Waldman interviewed me for *BOMB* magazine, and she asked me the question, "How is it to be a woman artist different now for the young women of today?" And at that - I said, "Well, *Vogue* magazine just printed a picture of five cute women artists. Okay. How are they going to feel - *Vogue* going to feel - about them when they're not cute any more, when they're mature women?" And every one of those women called me up and said, "Could we have a drink? Could we have a coffee?" They know. They know.

Now, when I was a young woman artist, the first two paintings I sold were bought by Si Newhouse. And he was a friend until he asked me if I would pose for *Vogue* magazine in dresses. He had some artists who would do that. And I said, "Well, Si, no. That's what I did before you bought my paintings. I don't want to do that now." I thought, that's humiliating. But now people do that. And now everything is so fast, it is a miracle to stay an artist for so many years. It is a true miracle, because now there are so many artists, who knows who's going to have

the courage and power to last? I mean, there are too many. Is everybody just going to be famous for Andy Warhol's 15 minutes? Or are people going to be able to ride out the duration?

MS. RICHARDS: And as you mentioned, there's the public relations machine that comes in.

MS. STEIR: And who has the public relations machine? And it is big. I mean, do you think so? Do you see that?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. Have you ever – some other women I've spoken to said that collectors told them many years ago, "I'll wait until after you're 40 to buy your work" –

MS. STEIR: I would say after 60, but – I think it's more complicated than that. I actually do think it's sexual, and that when – things get easier, like, after 55, after menopause. [Laughs.] Things get easier. After 60, they get easier still, with collectors. And I think it's because you're not a threat. You're not a sexual threat, and you're not a threat to the woman collector, the woman half of the pair. You can be more like, you know –

MS. RICHARDS: So it's not that you've established – that your market value has been established, and therefore it's less risky.

MS. STEIR: Oh, it's that, too. It's that, too. Of course. It's less risky.

MS. RICHARDS: But if you're 25 or 35, do you think that it's much easier to sell if you're a man?

MS. STEIR: I don't know, because I'm not part of that world, and I don't ask. But, see, I think now it's different, that it's just – I'm still living by the old – the people who collect me are more established. So I'm living by the old rules. The younger people, it seems like the buying is mad and not selective. So man/woman maybe doesn't make as much a difference, except for the very, very serious young artists approaching 40. Then man/woman starts to make a difference for them. Yeah. But there are more women out there than men. Always. Art schools were always traditionally filled with more women than men.

MS. RICHARDS: So the proportion of women who succeed is much smaller than the proportion of men who succeed, or succeed by –

MS. STEIR: Hanging in. And surviving. Getting museum attention. Yes, much smaller.

MS. RICHARDS: Those five young women who were in *Vogue* and called you, did they appreciate – believe your –

MS. STEIR: Yes. They were worried.

MS. RICHARDS: Did they regret having put themselves in that context?

MS. STEIR: No, because that's the context of today. What they were worried about was the future. One has prevailed, and the others have not, or have in a medium kind of way. Cecily [Brown]. Lisa Yuskavage. Cecily. Inka. Maybe there were only four. Cecily. Inka Essenhigh. Lisa Yuskavage. And the one who likes me the most, and I just blocked her name. She shows at Greene Naftali. Just had a baby two years –

MS. RICHARDS: Jacqueline Humphries?

MS. STEIR: Jacqueline Humphries. And they are. They're glamorous girls. But they know. They're not stupid. They're good artists.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MS. STEIR: So Lisa has prevailed. Cecily is always – she'll always be there. Inka Essenhigh, I don't know what's going to happen. She's a nice person, a good artist. And I can't remember, maybe there were only four. Anyway, I think they're all good artists – I mean, varying degrees of good, but –

MS. RICHARDS: The world of fashion and art have come together so much.

MS. STEIR: Andy Warhol. Couldn't you kill him? [Laughs.] He did it. I mean, he saw it coming, and he made it come. He was like a genius devil. What can you say?

MS. RICHARDS: And now so many people in the fashion world want to be associated with the art world and vice versa. But do you think that that's a – what do you think the impact is on the art world with this fascination with fashion and everything that fashion represents?

MS. STEIR: I can't say anything. I love fashion, and I have fashion designer collectors. So I love fashion. I like to be – I mean, it's an art to design a beautiful gown or a dress. It's a true art. So I just feel like –

MS. RICHARDS: Is that a very positive thing, that architects and other fields in the design world are connecting to artists? Is that a positive in terms of their openness to new ideas, what a fine artist represents?

MS. STEIR: I don't think architects are open to artists at all. If you look at some of the – the New Museum is the only viable new building for art. I was in Cincinnati [OH]. I had the show with Carl Solway, but –

MS. RICHARDS: In the Zaha Hadid building [Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, OH]?

MS. STEIR: Yeah. They have an incredibly sweet, smart young director.

MS. RICHARDS: Raphaela [Platow, Director and Chief Curator]?

MS. STEIR: Yeah. A marvelous young curator. And there they are with a building that's so hard to work with. Now, they bought a triptych of mine. And somebody said, "A triptych? They don't have a straight wall. How are they going to hang it?" So I'm going to go out there and take a look at what they did.

Steven Holl is good. Steven Holl is good. I proposed a project eight years ago with Zaha, and Joost's assistant then helped me design the project. And I had a person working for me who spent the money on the grant on herself, and Zaha hated her and we lost the project. And Zaha just took my idea. Joost's former assistant is her photographer now, became an architecture –

MS. RICHARDS: What was this project?

MS. STEIR: I wanted to build a portable, collapsible museum space, meditation space, on the idea of the panorama, but that it would collapse and fold up so you could ship it. It could travel, and it could be in train stations and city halls, and it would be – and I proposed – I had a sketchy idea for the design that I worked out with this guy who's now – I guess he's leaving today. That's his bag there.

Is Iwan [ph] upstairs?

MR. ELFFERS: No. Why?

MS. STEIR: Because I'm talking about the Zaha project that he and I designed. Anyway, I spoke to somebody, a PR person, who said, "Oh, but I'm doing the PR for it now." She did it for Chanel, used my idea for a portable, collapsible showroom for Chanel. Well, I don't care because I'm not an architect and – I don't care because I'm not an architect. But I wanted to – I'd never seen a building she built, and I wanted – I admired all her drawings and her personality and how she is, so big and grand.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MS. STEIR: And I wanted a show in a museum she built. But now I realize that you can't just put any show in that museum. You have to do something special. So I don't –

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. But other than architecture then, have you connected your work to – have you thought about creating furniture or any other kind of design?

MS. STEIR: Clothes, actually. Clothes.

MS. RICHARDS: Clothes? Have you created any clothes, or collaborated?

MS. STEIR: No, I haven't, but I always think I should.

MS. RICHARDS: Or had the imagery from your painting on them? [Laughs.]

MS. STEIR: Yeah. I did – I have had my imagery on a handbag and things like that. But it doesn't work. And what I would like to design would be what I could wear, very simple. Oh, I designed some rugs, some rugs. They're not on the floor right now but –

MS. RICHARDS: Tapestries for the wall, or actual –

MS. STEIR: No. Rugs for the floor. Let's see what else I did. I did rugs for the floor. What else did I do that's useful? No furniture. I think because I started out as a designer –

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. STEIR: – I steer away from it, except for clothes. I love clothes. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Are there any particular designers who are your favorite now who you feel sympathetic to in

terms of their vision?

MS. STEIR: Well, I always liked Issey Miyake, but now I don't anymore because he's not there. Somebody else designs. And then for years, I wore [Yohji] Yamamoto because no choice [is] involved. It's all black. And then last summer Mei-mei, my poet friend, my abstract, most esoteric – she's so sensitive; if it's raining in Chicago, she knows it and she's in New York. But she loves clothes, so we shop together. And then she introduced me to her favorite, her recent favorite. Oh, we liked [Martin] Margiela for a while. We went through everything. We really like clothes. And now Narciso Rodriguez, who's a very good designer, solid, solid, solid. So I like things that I can wear.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MS. STEIR: But I don't like anything knee-length. I like long clothes. And he just bought two paintings of mine. And he's a lovely man, a beautiful, beautiful man. And so I'm going to see if he'll make something I can wear. [Laughs.] Something long for me.

MS. RICHARDS: That's great. Well, this has been terrific. I think that we're at the end, and I really appreciate it.

MS. STEIR: I just want to say one more thing. Life is hard for everyone. And so it's not particularly harder to be an artist. I think it's particularly easier, because whether you starve or you flourish, financially, emotionally, and every other way, or when you starve and suffer, it's your own choice. And very few people take the opportunity to make their own choice and to live with their mistakes. You have to live with your mistakes. You can't deny them. They're right there, both social, political, business, and visual.

MS. RICHARDS: Very true.

MS. STEIR: They're all obvious.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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