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Oral history interview with Manuel Neri, 2008
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Manuel Neri on 2008 May 6. The interview was conducted in Benecia, California by Lynn Robert Matteson for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. This is a rough transcription that may include typographical errors.

Interview

LYNN MATTESON: This is Lynn Matteson. The date is May 6, 2008. I'm talking to Manuel Neri at his home and studio in Benecia, California. This is disc one.

Manuel, can you tell me your background? You were born in the central valley?

MANUEL NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: And 1930.

MR. NERI: Sanger, California, the middle of this valley out there, California, 1930, April 12.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, so you just had a birthday.

MR. NERI: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MATTESON: And you came from a Mexican family. Can you tell me the background? I know your father was in the revolution of 1924 in Mexico. What -- whereabouts from Mexico?

MR. NERI: Well, my family was from a little village in the highlands near Guadalajara, and the name of it was Arrandas. And my father wasn't in the military. He actually had gone through -- through university in Guadalajara. Was, you know, trained to be an attorney. Was back home in -- there in the little town where, you know, he met my mother and married.

And he was working for the revolutionary government and which were -- you know, that revolution of 1924 in Mexico was really against the church. And unfortunately, my mother's family was pro-church. And at one point, one of my uncles on my mother's side set out to kill my family. And my family could have just easily had him hung or shot with no problem. And my father did a fantastic thing, which was go to mother and say, "Dear, I can't -- I can't do this. We'll never be able to have a family together if this happens. It's not a matter of just killing one of your brothers. It's a matter of killing all the males in your family because these family things, feuds, are like that." And so my father said, "Instead of that, I'm going to go to America and then send for you."

And so he came here to this country and got a job. Fortunately, he -- he spoke a little English which he'd taken up at the university there in Guadalajara and was able to get along in this country and later sent for my mother. And, you know, and I was -- they came to California later, and I was born in California.

MR. MATTESON: Are you the eldest of the family?

MR. NERI: No. My -- my sister who was the first-born was actually born in Mexico before my mother left. So --

MR. MATTESON: So what kind of job did he have here when he was --

MR. NERI: My father arrived here in this country just in time for the --

MR. MATTESON: Depression?

MR. NERI: The big depression. And Mexicans were the blacks of their time. And there really wasn't a decent job. What my father did was go to a evening school at a high school and he took up auto mechanics and he started repairing cars.

MR. MATTESON: I see.

MR. NERI: Even that job didn't really hold out. And he had to eventually go out and work in the fields there, you know, in Sanger.

MR. MATTESON: What are the crops, just out of curiosity that they have? Is it cotton?

MR. NERI: Mainly vineyards.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, vineyards?

MR. NERI: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MATTESON: Oh, really. Then you moved to Oakland, your family. Is that --

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: -- is the next -- and why was that?

MR. NERI: My father died.

MR. MATTESON: I see.

MR. NERI: The war had started, World War II, and there were jobs, opportunities for my mother here in the Bay Area, you know, for women to work. So she came here, and they did very well.

MR. MATTESON: Was her English good enough for her to -- by that time?

MR. NERI: Good enough, yes.

MR. MATTESON: And so how many people in the family?

MR. NERI: Actually, there were just myself and my two sisters.

MR. MATTESON: Which is small by Mexican standards.

MR. NERI: Yes. And, you know, my mother, father, period. And then my father died when I was 9 years old. So, you know, it was a very tight little family.

MR. MATTESON: And you went to high school in Oakland?

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: And then from there, you went to City College of San Francisco?

MR. NERI: Well, I really set out to be an electrical engineer, went to [University of California] Berkeley.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, you did? Okay.

MR. NERI: And --

MR. MATTESON: How did you find that? I mean, Berkeley -- and this is, what, the early -- the mid '40s?

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: After the war, all the GIs are back.

MR. NERI: Yes. It was great. You know, the engineering thing was really good there, not that I really got into it. I just barely got into the basics. And at one point, I think in -- by 1950 I went to -- once in the summer I went to San Francisco to go to San Francisco City College over there to take -- to make up some math classes I needed and an English class. And just out of dumb luck, I decided to take an art class for an easy grade. And I met a wonderful man who changed my life.

MR. MATTESON: And who was that?

MR. NERI: Roy Walker was his name, and he just introduced me to the art world. And it was fantastic.

MR. MATTESON: How did he do that? I mean, did he single you out, or was it that he --

MR. NERI: In a way, he kind of did. He'd start talking to me. I started asking, "What's it all about, you know? What's going on?"

And at that time, the Bay Area was a very exciting place as far as teachers and the artists who were around. And he said, "Hey, just go over there. There's so-and-so at Berkeley, or there's so-and-so at, you know, other

schools.” And he said, “Just go in and say, ‘Can I just sit in in your class to listen?’”

And that’s what I did without spending any money, and it was fantastic.

MR. MATTESON: What did San Francisco -- how did it impress you when you go from Oakland to the big city? It’s a big change.

MR. NERI: No big deal. At that time San Francisco wasn’t the big, huge business center it is now. In fact, that’s why I’d left San Francisco because it was -- it did get big, and it lost that small town feeling that I really loved.

MR. MATTESON: This is to anticipate something a little later, but, you know, I followed your addresses, your studio addresses, in researching this and you were all over. But mainly, you were at North Beach and --

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: -- at one time you were in the Mission, on the first block of the Mission. And at that time the produce market was just a few blocks away.

MR. NERI: It wasn’t there then.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, it wasn’t there?

MR. NERI: Oh, no, no.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, they’d taken it out?

MR. NERI: No, they didn’t take it out. It just hadn’t arrived there yet. It was still kind of -- the docks were still working when I first arrived there.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, I see.

MR. NERI: It was a great place. I mean, there on -- in that building -- was a fantastic old building.

MR. MATTESON: Is it still there?

MR. NERI: And I had half the upper floor for a mere \$50 or something like that, you know. You know, there were - there were spaces for rent like that around in those days. And I could afford it.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. NERI: And Joan Brown and I shared that space.

MR. MATTESON: Okay. Did -- you then went -- finally, you migrated to [California College of] Arts and Crafts?

MR. NERI: After that class with Roy Walker, he told me about this -- I became interested in ceramics. And he said, “Hey, there’s a -- you know, there’s a good ceramic set-up at Arts and Crafts. And go talk to this guy, his name is Peter Voulkos. He’s a student there. He’s very interesting.”

So I went over and found Peter Voulkos and met him, and we became good friends. And really, that -- meeting him and talking to him really convinced me to go there -- to school there. And it was the right move.

MR. MATTESON: And so it was really ceramics that sort of turned you on at the --

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: And painting, you started to paint about that time, too, soon after?

MR. NERI: Yes, around that time. You know, the -- a lot of -- you know, by that time there were people like -- I met [Mark] Rothko who was -- who used to come to visit and teach classes at Berkeley. You know, they weren’t making very much in money, and they accepted teaching positions at the university. So I was able to sit in on his classes and meet him. And [Richard] Diebenkorn came and taught at Arts and Crafts. I was able to take his classes. It was great.

MR. MATTESON: Interestingly, I -- I didn’t meet him, but soon before his death, Rothko was back at Berkeley. He taught a summer session just before he committed suicide. So I used to see him in the halls, not a very happy looking guy.

MR. NERI: No, never was.

MR. MATTESON: Never was, even then when you first met him.

MR. NERI: Very quiet. But I -- it was interesting what he had to say to me.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, I bet. Diebenkorn is the one who thought you might be a better sculptor.

MR. NERI: We got along well. We hit it off well. He was a good teacher for me. I always loved his sense of color and his inventiveness in what he did in his work. That was really great.

MR. MATTESON: Was it at -- was it at a time where there was an element of self-consciousness in the Bay Area about the Bay Area figure school?

MR. NERI: Actually, that figure thing really came -- started late '50s, into the early '60s when all of a sudden, all these abstract teachers who were around all of a sudden start getting together and drawing the figure together. They drawing the figure together, and that's what started that whole figurative thing which was really great.

MR. MATTESON: And did you -- was David Park of this --

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: -- I mean at the -- at the school.

MR. NERI: I mean, I certainly wasn't part of it. I was a student there.

MR. MATTESON: Yes, right. But what I'm asking is whether or not there was this -- this element of we're doing something different.

MR. NERI: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MATTESON: Yeah. There was a self-consciousness about what they were --

MR. NERI: Yeah, they really rediscovered the figure for themselves through the -- that get-together they had.

MR. MATTESON: How did you enjoy painting? I mean, I've looked at your paintings, and I think they were fabulous.

MR. NERI: Well, you know, in those early years, as I said, I -- I was studying under and meeting all these abstract expressionists.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. NERI: And my work was very tinged by that. And it was later in the mid-'50s when I started to have kids, as I told you, that all of a sudden, the woman became -- rediscovered the woman in -- that she became this life-giving source for me. And I started using the female form as the vehicle to carry my ideas.

MR. MATTESON: Did -- did the flatness of painting bother you or was -- or you could have done that with a figurative -- a figure --

MR. NERI: Well, believe me, we were like really stacking that paint on.

MR. MATTESON: I could tell, yes.

MR. NERI: So it wasn't too flat.

MR. MATTESON: It wasn't too flat. It was --

MR. NERI: Well, you've seen Jay DeFeo's paintings.

MR. MATTESON: Right.

MR. NERI: I mean, we're all together at that time.

MR. MATTESON: Right, right. Right, that's pretty stuck on. And so in the Bay Area -- so here on the East -- in the East Bay, you're at Arts and Crafts and you -- you meet Diebenkorn. Diebenkorn tells you you ought to try sculpture.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: And you -- your first -- did you abandon ceramics altogether then at that point?

MR. NERI: Well, I became realistic about it, and in looking at my career after leaving -- what would happen to it after leaving school in that I wouldn't have the facilities and I couldn't afford the facilities. So I had to find another media source. So -- and I was using a lot of plaster at that time. So I decided to stick to plaster.

MR. MATTESON: Was -- Jay DeFeo was the one who taught you about or suggested plaster or was that -- did that --

MR. NERI: No.

MR. MATTESON: -- that came from her?

MR. NERI: No, no. I met Jay later after moving -- leaving Arts and Crafts and moving to San Francisco.

MR. MATTESON: Well, that's a correction in the record because there's a -- I've read where Jay DeFeo said you should try plaster because it's cheap.

MR. NERI: No.

MR. MATTESON: Okay.

MR. NERI: No. I was into plaster way before I met her.

MR. MATTESON: Good. Okay. That's good to know. And where did -- when did you meet Mark di Suvero? Was that in San Francisco or here?

MR. NERI: At school in Berkeley --

MR. MATTESON: I see.

MR. NERI: -- when I first started there. Here was this nut, you know. We became close friends. We looked at each other as Italians, you know, and, you know, became very close friends. As a matter of fact, he took me to visit his family who lived in -- at that time they lived in south San Francisco. His brothers and sisters were still very young and lived at home.

MR. MATTESON: That's a very working-class area.

MR. NERI: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I mean, this area was empty fields at that time. There was this little ranch house out in the middle of the fields, which was their house.

MR. MATTESON: Wow.

MR. NERI: And, I mean, little small place. And I went out there and walked in the door, and here were these family portraits hanging on the wall painted by these famous Italian painters, you know, a library that was unbelievable which I couldn't let go of, fascinating. His father was a super famous Italian naval hero.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, really.

MR. NERI: His mother was a countess.

MR. MATTESON: Oh.

MR. NERI: You know. As a matter of fact, he was a naval attaché in Peking in China, his father. And when [Benito] Mussolini finally started to get rid of the Jews -- the family was Jewish from Venice, and they came to him and told him, you know, you're not Italian anymore, goodbye. In the middle of China, the family just cast away.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, my God.

MR. NERI: And luckily, they were able to get to this country.

MR. MATTESON: Interesting, really interesting. When you -- you sort of bring up something which I don't know if it means anything, but going to Berkeley, say, at that time, there's all this influx of returning GIs on the GI Bill, big mix of people. Were you at all self-conscious of being Latino in this mix because there couldn't have been many?

MR. NERI: Oh, very much so. But you've got to remember that in those early days when I was a kid growing up, we lived in Latino cities, little cities where everybody in my neighborhood spoke Spanish, and I didn't feel like an

outcast of any sort, not at all. They were living in my country, and I wasn't living in theirs.

MR. MATTESON: But it switched when you got to Berkeley.

MR. NERI: Oh, sure.

MR. MATTESON: And did you ever get used to it?

MR. NERI: No. I step out of one world into another. I had to make that change, but that flavoring, that Latino flavoring will always be with me. And I think it's very important to me.

MR. MATTESON: I'm going to get to that in a while because that I do want to look at particularly.

MR. NERI: You made it.

MR. MATTESON: Mary Julia [Klimenko] has joined us.

MS. MARY JULIA KLIMENKO: Hi.

MR. MATTESON: Hi, good morning.

MS. KLIMENKO: I had to talk to Anne. When Anne calls, it takes a long time.

MR. MATTESON: Let me see. So you're in -- hi, Charlie. Charlie's a dog. The -- you go to San Francisco, and you immediately -- what happens there? Now you're finished with school, and you're basically an artist.

MR. NERI: No, no. I went -- I went to San Francisco to -- to go to the San Francisco Art Institute.

MR. MATTESON: At the institute there.

MR. NERI: Actually, I was following Diebenkorn --

MR. MATTESON: I see.

MR. NERI: -- who switched over.

MR. MATTESON: I see.

MR. NERI: And met a whole new gang of teachers, fantastic group. The school had gone through a really defunct period, and, you know, there were -- hell, there must have been 90 regular students in school or something like that which was great. You know, we had those teachers all to ourselves.

MR. MATTESON: Was this the -- under [Douglas] MacAgy?

MR. NERI: Yeah.

MR. MATTESON: Or was he brought in to straighten it out?

MR. NERI: Who was it there? I forget his name.

MR. MATTESON: Ernst Mundt?

MR. NERI: No, no, no. That was a long time. This was '57.

MR. MATTESON: It had to be Ernst Mundt, yeah. So in '57, you're there at the institute, and you're living where?

MR. NERI: At that time you could find a fantastic room for \$35 in North Beach and a decent, you know, studio.

MR. MATTESON: And this was where you were -- is this the time that you were living -- the studio was -- beneath Café Trieste?

MR. NERI: Well, later on I found that space, and I moved in. So I was living and working down there both.

MR. MATTESON: About that -- about 1960, something like that, yeah.

MR. NERI: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MATTESON: Well, I was upstairs at the coffee shop.

MR. NERI: As a matter of fact, the coffee shop and I moved into that building at the same time.

MR. MATTESON: Is that so?

MR. NERI: We used to share the toilet, as a matter of fact.

MR. MATTESON: And across the street, across the upper Grant Street is La Pantera [Restaurant].

MR. NERI: Right.

MR. MATTESON: I was there once, and Beniamino Bufano was there.

MR. NERI: Benny was all over the place there. I got to meet him. It was -- we never really talked, but, you know, we'd say hi and -- I never really -- I should have talked with him more, but there were so many people around, fantastic people around.

MR. MATTESON: That upper Grant Street scene was pretty wild. I mean, it was really interesting.

MR. NERI: Yeah. North Beach was still very Italian in those days.

MR. MATTESON: That's right, and we talked about this yesterday. Those paisani [ph] used to sit on the benches at Washington Square, wonderful bocce ball was, you know --

MR. NERI: Oh, yes.

MR. MATTESON: -- quite the -- yeah, it was really a wonderful place. You meet Joan Brown in 1956, around that time?

MR. NERI: Fifty-seven, early '57.

MR. MATTESON: Early '57.

MR. NERI: That's when I switched over to the [San Francisco] Art Institute.

MR. MATTESON: I see.

MR. NERI: And I met her in Elmer Bischoff's class, the first class I took there, and Joan Brown had just arrived and started art school there in that class.

MR. MATTESON: This was a girl who came from this very strict sort of Catholic background.

MR. NERI: Yeah, her father was a bank executive, you know, like very straight family.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. NERI: And she was wild as hell.

MR. MATTESON: As wild as hell and at that place, at the institute, which was wild, too. Yeah. So yesterday you showed your -- this portrait, the picture that you have of -- by her and it was her --

MR. NERI: She painted in that class.

MR. MATTESON: In that Bischoff class.

MR. NERI: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, really interesting, fascinating. So you got together, you and Joan and for a number of years worked side by side, lived together and worked side by side. And the influence between the two, it looked pretty tight between -- the interplay between both of you.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: You see it in her work, and you see it in your work.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: It's like a jazz combo playing off one another. What was that like to have -- to be that close to someone and -- and not only emotionally and physically but in terms of having this profession -- not a profession but creative bouncing back and forth between the two of you?

MR. NERI: For me, it was a very comfortable relationship, and that was because I liked what she was doing, I trusted what she was trying to do -- trying to do and we talked. We exchanged ideas a lot and got along great on that. You know, we felt free to go in -- walk in the studio and say, "Hey, I don't like the way that arm is going. Can I change that?" And just go over and do it.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, really?

MR. NERI: And nobody thought anything about it, you know. I mean, she might change it back again afterwards but no big deal.

MR. MATTESON: No territoriality about that?

MR. NERI: Right.

MR. MATTESON: Good. You were -- when you came to San Francisco, was it at the same time that you were at the institute that you became director of the Six Gallery [CA]?

MR. NERI: That was toward -- yes, I was still a student there when I took over.

MR. MATTESON: And can you describe that -- that whole scene at the Six Gallery, what it was as you recall?

MR. NERI: It was -- it wasn't the usual art gallery. It was an artist co-op really, and as I told you, I was director for two years. And my claim to fame was I never sold anything. Nobody cared about selling. Everybody just wanted to talk to each other, exchange ideas, and that was the best part about it.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. NERI: You can't do that anymore. Christ, I go to New York nowadays, and sometimes an old friend will say, "Sorry, I can't take you up to my studio. I'm working with some new ideas."

What the hell is that all about, I mean? And I don't know. And great things happened at that Six Gallery. I remember one day Peter Forakis and I went to this little poetry reading in Berkeley at this -- this moving company had a basement thing where they had poetry sessions and other things happening down in this little room. And we met [Allen] Ginsberg, and we liked what he had to say. And so we walked to him afterwards, and I said, "Hey." I said to him, "Why don't you come and read at the Six Gallery? You'll enjoy it. There's some good people there who are coming there."

And said, "Sure." And he showed up the following Saturday, and he read "Howl," [1955] his poem "Howl" for the first time.

MR. MATTESON: For the first time. Wow, that's epic, yeah. Did you -- did you also have jazz gigs there? Was it the kind of thing where you did that as well?

MR. NERI: Yes. You know, not too much. There was a lot of jazz happening. It was very free and open. They all were -- no, they didn't really come to play. It was more the arts -- I mean the visual art thing.

MR. MATTESON: And where was it located again? Was it on Fillmore [Street]?

MR. NERI: On Fillmore down, you know, below -- below Broadway.

MR. MATTESON: Okay. All right. It was out of the black -- at that time Fillmore was --

MR. NERI: Oh, way out of that.

MR. MATTESON: It was the all-black section, but it was -- it was more north -- north Fillmore.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: Okay.

MR. NERI: And it was just an old garage that -- it worked, you know. I think, again, it was -- I mentioned \$35. It seemed like it was the going rate, but at first it was 35 and went up to 55, so. But we had -- it was unbelievable. Like, there were people who liked what was happening there who had money and they -- they paid the rent.

MR. MATTESON: Oh.

MR. NERI: So we never had to worry about selling or raising money or anything like that. It was great.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah. Now, the kind of work you were doing at that time has been called sort of funky. You know, it's --

MR. NERI: We -- we named it funk.

MR. MATTESON: Funk.

MR. NERI: We brought up the word.

MR. MATTESON: And according to what I've read is that you heard it from a jazz musician.

MR. NERI: They used to use the word funky and -- which was a put-down to the music they called funky. And we decided just go for the word funk in our funk art. I remember Bruce Conner wanted Rat Bastard. [Laughs.]

MR. MATTESON: Right.

MR. NERI: Or something like that.

MR. MATTESON: There's a lot of your work at that period where you're using burlap and cardboard --

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: -- and twine.

MR. NERI: I -- I didn't have the money to buy the real materials.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah. I was -- but Conner's work is sort of like that as well.

MR. NERI: Yes, he was -- he had to use the same stockpile.

MR. MATTESON: Right, okay. So that -- there's a lot to explain style by just -- just the economic materials available to one, I suppose. And another thing which is associated with that period of -- with -- of the Beat, so-called Beat generation school is a kind of sense of existential crisis. Did you ever sense that?

MR. NERI: Crisis? No.

MR. MATTESON: No.

MR. NERI: No, no, not at all. We never worried about anything. Life was pretty easy for us then, you know. Certainly, you weren't eating much, you know. And we were -- we were at the bottom of the free rag pile. That's for sure.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, it's -- it's -- I'm thinking if the work of the period -- I mean, there's an awful lot of humor in it. Those birds that you did, I mean, those were intended to have a kind of humorous --

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: -- manner, wasn't it? So there's a kind of playfulness in that kind of work which I don't think transfers over into the news later on.

MR. NERI: Well, you know, that whole bird idea, how it got started was that Joan Brown wanted to paint a bird to be -- have a bird in one of her canvases. And she wanted to buy a stuffed bird, you know, to have around or a live bird, and we couldn't afford it. So I made her a bird, and from then I started making birds. And that's how that got started.

MR. MATTESON: You know, I'm reminded by that stuffed bird that she was interested, there's a --

MR. NERI: And she made some, as a matter of fact.

MR. MATTESON: Yes, she did. There's a [Joan] MirÃ© sculpture. I don't know if you know it. It's called *Poetic Object* [1936] where it's a bunch of objects, a derby hat at the bottom and it has a wooden thing at the top. It's a stuffed parrot. Do you know that?

MR. NERI: Yes, I think I do.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, it's -- and I was wondering if MirÃ© -- and the reason I mention is not only because of the bird business, but in Joan Brown's work, there's a dog barking at a moon and with a ladder in it. And that is very much taken, too, with -- as a MirÃ© picture as well. It has those elements in it, and I was wondering if you were

looking at MirÃ at all.

MR. NERI: No.

MR. MATTESON: Or her?

MR. NERI: Whether Joan was looking at the ladder image or any of that, I don't know. She never told me.

MR. MATTESON: Okay. But you were constantly looking at books for -- for --

MR. NERI: Oh, yes, certainly, yeah. Luckily, the Art Institute had a good collection.

MR. MATTESON: So -- so when is it that you actually started to -- you said it was after the birth of your child that you started to concentrate on the female form, and can you put a year on that?

MR. NERI: Well, there wasn't a real cutoff point where there was a big changeover. Slowly, that figure came in.

MR. MATTESON: Did it start in drawings perhaps before you got to sculpture?

MR. NERI: Yes, oh, yes. But, you know, I kept painting those -- you know, those window series for a long time.

MR. MATTESON: Yes. I think those are marvelous pictures.

MR. NERI: And so slowly, the figure thing came into it, and it wasn't till -- till I moved here in '64, here to Benicia that that real changeover happened where I stopped painting altogether and completely concentrated on the figure.

MR. MATTESON: Now, in looking at the figures, it seems to be fairly consistent throughout most of the work that I can see, you're not interested in the personality of the figure.

MR. NERI: No, not at all. I've told you that it's not the personality. I've always been fascinated by body language that people have, what they say with their bodies.

[END TR 01 DISC 01.]

MR. MATTESON: Okay. So we're recording again. You had your first show -- one-man show in 1960 at Dilexi [Gallery, CA]. Would that -- would you say that was your -- the beginning of your -- your being -- your recognition in the Bay Area?

MR. NERI: No.

MR. MATTESON: No?

MR. NERI: There wasn't the -- there wasn't that whole interest in collector thing in those days. There were some, certainly, but they weren't buying big, you know. And as I've told you before, you know, like the prices were way down. At that show, I don't think I sold anything, or I may have but it wasn't anything of consequence because the money was way low and --

MR. MATTESON: Yeah. How did Jim Newman run that place? I mean, if he wasn't selling very much, I wonder.

MR. NERI: Well, he had family money. He kept going.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. NERI: And he did have people who --

MR. MATTESON: Sold.

MR. NERI: I mean, he was able to sell their work.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah. Your first -- your first show that you had in San Francisco, was it with Joan Brown together, the two of you or was it --

MR. NERI: I forget. We had little things all over, you know, scattered around, but real official gallery shows or shows at museums, that came much later.

MR. MATTESON: I see. Yeah, okay.

MR. NERI: You got to remember, as I told you, my first 20 years of my art world, I hardly sold anything.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah. And you were teaching. You had teaching gigs after --

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: So you were teaching.

MR. NERI: Luckily, that's what kept me going.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah. So you were teaching at the institute --

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: -- or now the institute and then Berkeley for one semester or one year.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: What was the difference -- I mean, as a teacher, what did you find -- what attracted you, did you like teaching?

MR. NERI: Yes, I did. Coming in contact with young people who were at that time -- you know, it was an interesting world, and you didn't have the hundreds of art students. People who taking classes because they were really interested, and they were eager and ready to work. And that I found really interesting.

MR. MATTESON: And was there a different kind of student at the institute than what you'd encountered at Berkeley when you taught at Berkeley?

MR. NERI: Yes. The -- you've got to remember that the Art Institute was a private school and students had to pay. I mean, there was all sorts of, you know, financial thing at Berkeley but not as much. I really didn't meet that many interesting people at Berkeley. There were some, yes, you know, but not like that -- you know, that river of young people at the Art Institute.

MR. MATTESON: What about the faculty at Berkeley? There were some -- there was Erle Loran and Glenn Wessels.

MR. NERI: There were some good people, but there were --

MR. MATTESON: Sidney Gordin, was he there at that time?

MR. NERI: Who?

MR. MATTESON: Sidney Gordin.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: He was there?

MR. NERI: Sidney Gordin was there.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. NERI: It was kind of an older crowd for a different world really, from an older generation.

MR. MATTESON: Generation, yeah.

MR. NERI: But it's okay.

MR. MATTESON: Why did they hire you? Did they want the fresh blood, do you think?

MR. NERI: I was practically free.

MR. MATTESON: I see. That's a consideration. I just want to hop back for a second to the institute with you as a student. You sat in on a Clyfford Still --

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: -- who was a fairly controversial figure even when he was --

MR. NERI: He was a bastard.

MR. MATTESON: He was a bastard. No one says a good thing about this guy that I've ever talked to. Roy --

MR. NERI: But I learned a lot from him, though.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. NERI: A lot.

MR. MATTESON: In what ways was he difficult for you?

MR. NERI: He was an obnoxious bastard who, you know -- you know, he was the type of teacher who if he didn't like you for some reason or other, what you said or what you were doing or what -- would say, "Get out of my class right now. I don't want to see you again."

He'd do things like that, you know.

MR. MATTESON: But what did you learn from him? I mean, you said that you --

MR. NERI: The responsibility that that you put your name to had to really, truly represent you and you had to be responsible for it, and you were held responsible by him to what you were doing.

MR. MATTESON: The -- I think that's what -- we can leave the institute now, and finally, I think we come to working with the female figure, to bring that up again. And the first ones, were they with plaster? Were you working with plaster at the beginning with the --

MR. NERI: Well, as I said, a lot of drawing.

MR. MATTESON: A lot of drawing, yes, I knew that.

MR. NERI: Yeah. And then you've got to remember, I didn't have the money for a lot of plaster. [Laughs.]

MR. MATTESON: Even plaster was hard?

MR. NERI: You know, it was like \$3 a bag or something like that, and I couldn't afford that.

MR. MATTESON: Wow.

MR. NERI: But, you know, when that whole figurative happened among that whole crowd of teachers I had, that was really exciting and that further excited me about the figure. You know, the way Park was painting, you know, just knocked me out, Elmer Bischoff, you know, Diebenkorn, for Christ's sakes.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, right. The work that comes out of that period, or let me say -- let me ask you this: Drawings have always been a big part of your creative process.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: And they have continued to be, and what is it about the -- how -- how do you make that transition from the drawing to the three-dimensional object? What does -- what does the drawing do for you that --

MR. NERI: You've got to see it from the -- I see it from the point of view where drawing is not necessarily an art, you know, product. It's a -- it's a way of putting down ideas quickly to refer to later, whether it's toward painting or toward drawing, you know, finished work or towards sculpture. It's just throwing ideas down that you can come back to and refer to and even -- all those old drawings, I'm still going back and, you know, taking ideas out of there.

MR. MATTESON: When you looked at other sculptor's drawings, did you -- have you looked -- I mean, did you examine other drawings by other --

MR. NERI: Of course.

MR. MATTESON: And who did you find?

MR. NERI: As varied as somebody like the Italian [Lucio] Fontana.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, really?

MR. NERI: All over, you know, early Chinese, you know, just I looked all over. I was desperate. [Laughs.]

MR. MATTESON: The -- when you -- when you went back to the figurative sculpture, I mean, the name that leaps out is, of course, [Auguste] Rodin, and the Legion of Honor has a really incredible collection of Rodin.

MR. NERI: Yes, yes.

MR. MATTESON: And that must have been a stop on your way.

MR. NERI: Believe me, yes.

MR. MATTESON: Especially those little plaster maquettes.

MR. NERI: Right.

MR. MATTESON: Good, because I haven't seen that in the literature.

MR. NERI: First time I got to Paris, I went straight for --

MR. MATTESON: The Musée Rodin.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: Right.

MR. NERI: -- to look at those early plaster studies, mainly.

MR. MATTESON: They're extraordinary.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: And I see it a little bit later in your work, but there's a lot of the [Edgar] Degas sculpture as well.

MR. NERI: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MATTESON: And were you looking at him then or --

MR. NERI: I was --

MR. MATTESON: Everybody.

MR. NERI: I was -- everything.

MR. MATTESON: Everything.

MR. NERI: You know, I didn't draw the line on anything.

MR. MATTESON: Okay. Now, you went to Europe in 1961, I think, with Joan Brown?

MR. NERI: Sixty.

MR. MATTESON: Sixty with Joan Brown. This was your first contact with Europe, actually being there.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: And you -- it must have blown you away.

MR. NERI: Oh, boy, did it.

MR. MATTESON: In what way?

MR. NERI: Well, Joan and I decided to really make a casual exploration, and what we did -- we did the dumb thing of taking the ocean liner which -- this brand-new Italian cruise ship, whatever you want to call it, we took it to Europe, and it arrived in Spain. It made a little, quick stop in Spain for probably fuel or something or other, and, as you remember, like we were getting off because we wanted to go straight to Madrid, you know, the museums there. And the boat stopped there, and they let us off in this little -- they opened up a doorway down at the waterline, and we got in this rowboat. And they rowed us ashore. It wasn't an official stop.

And we just took trains all over and visited different towns in Spain. But first, of course, we went to -- we went to

Madrid and just knocked out by the stuff we saw there. And another fantastic thing that happened, we -- Joan and I at that time were showing in New York, George Staempfli there in New York. And he had a summer home in Cadaques [Spain] in the coast, Costa Brava, and he had invited us to come and visit. And it's a -- so we called him up when we were in Madrid and said, "Can we come by and visit?"

He said, "Okay. Come on over. We're going to have a party for you."

So we arrived late in the day, went straight to the party, walked in. The list of the people who were there were just a knockout.

MR. MATTESON: Can you remember?

MR. NERI: Man Ray was there. [Marcel] Duchamp was there, and it -- and all these others that I probably don't even know who the hell they were. But these people were there because they spent the summer there at the beach. [Salvador] Dali was there. He lived close by.

MR. MATTESON: He lived --

MR. NERI: All I could do was like back up into a corner and sit down, and it -- a funny thing happened. Duchamp's girlfriend came on to me, this big, tall beautiful knockout redhead. She wanted me to go hiking with her, and I kept looking at Duchamp and saying, "Oh, my God." And I said, "I'm sorry. I can't go."

Anyway, I was with Joan. And he was kind of laughing over in the corner. And then he said -- later toward the end of the evening, he said, "Hey, join me for coffee in the morning."

And it turned out, I was there for about four days. We were there about four days, and Duchamp and I would have coffee every morning.

MR. MATTESON: Really?

MR. NERI: And it was great.

MR. MATTESON: What did you talk about?

MR. NERI: Well, I didn't want to harangue him about his work. You know, I didn't want to do that. What I asked him was, "Would you please tell me of who you thought was important in the '20s in Paris?"

And he started naming off these names whom I didn't know and -- but the important thing was why they were important to the art world that he knew there. For me, what happened in Paris in the '20s was just fantastic, unbelievable.

MR. MATTESON: Were you aware of that then?

MR. NERI: Yes. Yeah, that's why I was able to ask him.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, yeah.

MR. NERI: I had started reading, you know, about some of these people before that.

MR. MATTESON: What was it about the '20s that you sort of -- was it the surrealists or the Dadaists or?

MR. NERI: Just that whole thing of all of a sudden it became the -- the art world just exploded there.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, including music among other --

MR. NERI: Yes. It was completely fascinating. And later in the kitchen, I'll take you in there. I have this thing up on the wall where all these people's names and photographs are there to look at.

MR. MATTESON: Okay.

MR. NERI: And my old heroes.

MR. MATTESON: Well --

MR. NERI: Everything from like the old guy like [Ernest] Hemingway and that --

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, right, [Gertrude] Stein and --

MR. NERI: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MATTESON: [Francis] Picabia, you discovered Picabia on this trip. And what, you hadn't heard of Picabia, or you didn't know his work that much?

MR. NERI: Here in this country, of course, I hadn't heard of him at all. It was discovering names I hadn't heard about beforehand that was so great. Going to little galleries, you know, looking up these people. Some people I had heard about, and I made a point of searching them down and when they had shows in Europe -- when they were having shows in Europe.

MR. MATTESON: Of course, you knew [Constantin] Brancusi -- of Brancusi before you went --

MR. NERI: Oh, yes.

MR. MATTESON: And I mean, did you ever have a chance to go visit the studio?

MR. NERI: George, this friend of mine who was my dealer, knew him, and both Joan and I wanted to meet him. And I said, "George, you got to make an appointment so we can go by and visit him in Paris."

And he did. And Joan and I, I remember, we walked down this little alley where he had his studio, got to his store, and we stood there for almost an hour. And we couldn't knock. We just couldn't knock. So we just went off and had a glass of wine. He was -- you know, we kept saying, "He doesn't speak English. You know, we don't speak French. What -- we're just going to bug him."

MR. MATTESON: Yeah. Well, were there other artists that you met that you think that -- at the time that you remember?

MR. NERI: Yes, oh, yes, very much so.

MR. MATTESON: You never met [Pablo] Picasso?

MR. NERI: No, no, no. I never wanted to meet Picasso.

MR. MATTESON: Did you like his work?

MR. NERI: I wanted to meet his wives. [Laughs.]

MR. MATTESON: Did you like his work? I mean --

MR. NERI: Oh, yeah.

MR. MATTESON: -- the ceramic work as well as the --

MR. NERI: I loved the work because I loved the humor in his work. You know, most people don't see that. It was great.

MR. MATTESON: Did you bring anything back? I mean, if you could put your finger on it, did you bring anything back from that European experience? I mean, one of the things that would strike me -- and I don't want to put words in your mouth -- is the way artists are held in Europe, I mean, as a cultural -- they're not -- they're not seen as quacks.

MR. NERI: That's right. But at that time when I went in 1960, the French were so very leery of this new gang, the Americans. And, you know, when I used to walk into a gallery, a museum and mention that I was from America, they'd say, "Oh, you are."

MR. MATTESON: Oh, I see.

MR. NERI: And the conversation stopped there.

MR. MATTESON: That's interesting. Now, we seem to be getting on to the human figure again. I want to get back to that.

MR. NERI: Certainly.

MR. MATTESON: You first started modeling Mary Julia in 1972. How did you meet?

MR. NERI: We met right here in town, in Benicia --

MR. MATTESON: Oh, I see.

MR. NERI: -- at a little party, a mutual friend of ours. And she was a very good-looking young woman at that time. And I said, "Oh, God, here's a dirty old man asking a young cutie to model for him."

So I asked our -- the woman whose party it was at to -- would she ask her if she would care to model for me, and she did. And Mary Julia said yes. So we started working together, and it -- as I told you, I used to have my models read poetry to me while -- while I worked. And Mary Julia started reading poetry to me, and then she started writing poetry. And I'll be damned, it was great. Here was this high school dropout with a couple of kids, just writing great poetry. And I know she'll -- she won't agree with me, but I said, "Mary Julia, you've got to go back to school and do a little studying with people. There's some great poets around. San Francisco State [University] has a fantastic center there. You've got to go over there."

And she did. She went to San Francisco State, got through the schooling there. They hired her when she graduated, and she taught there for a while. And she became interested in that thing she does of working, you know -- wanting to be a therapist. So she took classes and really got into it, and she's terrific at it and has a fantastic clientele.

MR. MATTESON: Well, what about her as a -- what did -- I mean, you -- what I find interesting is that you -- there's a kind of contradiction in that you have -- you say that you don't really have personality -- your figures are not meant to convey personality, but you have stuck with the same model for a long, long time. And how does that -- how do you reconcile that?

MR. NERI: I liked -- Mary Julia had a great figure, still pretty well does even at her age. And as I said, I love body language that people have, the way they move, the way they position themselves. That says so much of the person for me, and this has almost nothing to do with the face. That's my interest there. In fact, a lot of times, I'll even leave the head off because I don't want to deal with that -- you know, that target going straight to the face to see what that figure's all about. The body is -- what it has to say is what I'm interested in.

MR. MATTESON: You did do portraits at the beginning.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: And you --

MR. NERI: Friends.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, friends. And that doesn't really attract you any longer?

MR. NERI: No.

MR. MATTESON: It had a short span of interest for you?

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: I see. And so the -- the -- now, when you have someone like a congenial model like Mary Julia, do you have her move at her own will?

MR. NERI: I like the way she moves.

MR. MATTESON: Okay. But do you have her --

MR. NERI: So I depend on that.

MR. MATTESON: You depend on how she just moves, and then you say freeze it or stop or?

MR. NERI: No. Usually, that finding those right positions, I'll do drawings. She's moving, a quick sketch, and I have that, that thing that interests me.

MR. MATTESON: I think Rodin did --

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: Rodin did the same thing, yeah.

MR. NERI: And so later, I'll bring the drawings into the studio and I say, "How about this? I want to see that?" And so we work those ideas.

MR. MATTESON: I see. I see. And then I -- and then when you get the -- when you're working with plaster -- this is technical -- and you're working, is there a chicken wire mesh underneath it all, or is --

MR. NERI: Sometimes. At first, that chicken wire was there because I used a wooden armature. I couldn't afford a metal armature. But now that I use a metal armature, it's really strong enough to support the weight of the figure. So I use a lot of Styrofoam to build up the form --

MR. MATTESON: I see.

MR. NERI: -- with some burlap holding that down also.

MR. MATTESON: Now, when you paint on the plaster, are you trying to get away from the whiteness? Are you trying to --

MR. NERI: Sometimes. I go snowblind looking at these things right now.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, I can understand that. I could understand that.

MR. NERI: But sometimes I want to break the structure down into certain areas, and I use color to do that for me. I use color to accent or as a destructive element on the figure.

MR. MATTESON: Now, a lot of people have said that -- especially with the early plaster models and continuing really into the '70s, that the figure is attacked. Would you agree with that? And the comparison that they make - - at least one of the writers has -- is with [Willem] de Kooning's women series with that same sort of -- I mean, that is an extreme case where he is just dissected the -- the woman. There isn't that vehemence in your figures.

MR. NERI: Well, I can relate to de Kooning, what he did. As a matter of fact, you know, he used to have a daughter, a young daughter here in San Francisco, and he would come to visit a lot in the early years. And one time we met at a party, and we spent a 48-hour period straight through without going to bed just --

MR. MATTESON: Just talking?

MR. NERI: -- talking and drinking. And that was really interesting, got to know each other.

MR. MATTESON: Well, did -- do you agree? I mean, do you have that sense of --

MR. NERI: Oh, yes. It can be.

MR. MATTESON: -- aggressive?

MR. NERI: But it's not an attack upon the female necessarily. I more or less see it as that destructive force we have upon ourselves and what we do to each other is what I want to talk about there. God knows, I receive enough letters from the Guerrilla Girls. I don't know if you know who that group is.

MR. MATTESON: I know, yeah, and I -- tell me about these letters.

MR. NERI: Well, you know, why are you attacking the women, chopping on their bodies? And, again, I want to bring up that point that the female figure represents humanity to me and not just the woman alone.

MR. MATTESON: Mm-hmm [affirmative], the sexuality is not necessarily as overt as some people would see it.

MR. NERI: Right.

MR. MATTESON: But it's a more generalized -- symbolic of the human -- the human race and the human plight and the human condition?

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: Is -- I don't want to -- does that sort of --

MR. NERI: It fits into what I see.

[END TR 02 DISC 01.]

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, okay. We're going to wait, I guess, for Mary Julia to come back to talk about her involvement with you. But in the meantime, you -- in the '70s you came to the female figure in a big way and -- well, let me go back. For a while there was a respite from the human figure for a number of years in the early '60s, mid '60s. You started doing minimalist work.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: And --

MR. NERI: And that came out of the painting, really. Those --

MR. MATTESON: From the window series.

MR. NERI: -- the structure there.

MR. MATTESON: The window series, those were so tactile, and there's a -- in those paintings, there's this tactility, and yes, there's a lot of structure in that thing. But the overwhelming impression is just the sensuality of the paint surface and that color which was remarkable. And then all of a sudden, you have this almost Sol LeWitt cubes, and it was -- how do you explain that? That was a sea change.

MR. NERI: I -- I find it hard to explain that. It just happened, you know.

MR. MATTESON: It just happened.

MR. NERI: And it was something that happened in a very short period of time, you know. I still have some leftover things out of that. In fact, I should have shown you some when we went to the other studio that I have in the storage room there.

I don't know. I really don't know what to say about that stuff, you know. I just felt I had to do it, you know, but nothing came out of it.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, that's -- because you went back fairly quickly. But I'm curious, you've said once that in times of crises you tend to -- you change. There's this kind of change. Do you think that happened about that same time?

MR. NERI: I forget. What crisis came up?

MR. MATTESON: I'm sure it had to do with women.

MR. NERI: Probably so. Not really. It's just -- it's because it kept going, and it was just something that I became fascinated by investigating those structures that were coming out of the painting and bringing them out -- sort of bringing them out into the open and really looking at them, taking a hard look at them, see what could happen with them.

MR. MATTESON: Were you look -- I mean, Minimalism was sort of in the air at the time.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: And there was big shows in Los Angeles, I remember.

MR. NERI: Oh, yes, yes, very much so.

MR. MATTESON: Dwan Gallery is in Los Angeles and did a big Sol LeWitt show, and Donald Judd was all over the place. And you must have been -- *ArtForum* was full of those images.

MR. NERI: Yeah, but you got to remember, you know, like those early teachers of mine, they -- you know, it came out of them.

MR. MATTESON: Well, in a way I suppose you could say that those Diebenkorn Ocean Park series --

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: -- is a kind of Minimalism for -- given that in a sense. I never thought about it that way, but that's one way to think about it. There was also trips to Mexico that you took during that time.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: And did you find some kind of -- of rapport with --

MR. NERI: Actually, it was connected with that whole -- these funny boxy sculptural ideas. I became fascinated. I started looking at pre-Columbian architecture in Mexico. That's Aztec stuff, the pyramids and what have you, and I -- right after that, I started, you know, like going to Mexico and looking around at those pyramids, going out to look at them and really walking around them and to see what was happening there and became very

fascinated by them. And the following summer -- what year was that? I forget. I forget what year.

MR. MATTESON: Some time in the early '60s.

MR. NERI: Well, when I started going to Mexico in '55.

MR. MATTESON: That's right, with Mark di Suvero?

MR. NERI: Mm-hmm [affirmative], and --

MR. MATTESON: Oh, Billy Al Bengston.

MR. NERI: With Billy, yeah, yeah. We all got this -- you know, just got in the bus and went down there. And, you know, that's when I first really had a good look at that pre-Columbian architecture, and I became fascinated by it. And in 1969 -- well, after that then I took a drive. I had -- I finally had a good car, and I drove through Mexico and drove further down south, you know, Honduras and those places and went to look at that pre-Columbian architecture, came back and just knocked me out, what I saw. And in 1969, I -- again, I raised some money and was able to fly to Peru and spent a little over two weeks just going all over in Peru, a knockout place, just unbelievable. It was great.

MR. MATTESON: What is it that that struck you? I mean, what is it about the -- both the Aztec and the --

MR. NERI: The fascination of what people do, never mind what the reasons, you know, religious or otherwise or -- what they do, you know, for these -- the churches have been built in Europe and in Peru and what have you, just amazing. You know, going there to -- up in the mountains in Peru and going to Sacsayhuaman. You know, they've got these damn blocks that are 6 feet high, you know, square or bigger, you know, tons and tons per block. And how the hell did they move them? You know, and the joints between these stones are -- you know, you can barely put a piece of paper between them. It's just unbelievable.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah. So those -- do you think those -- that geometric plainness of the -- of the pyramids, was that a -- was that a kind of thing that might have attributed to this fling at minimalism?

MR. NERI: Well, it wasn't a simple --

MR. MATTESON: No, there isn't.

MR. NERI: -- structure. These forms are really unbelievable, free, and I was fascinated, you know, by all of this.

MR. MATTESON: This -- the reason why I'm asking this -- these questions aside from is that I noticed soon after you did these, you did a series devoted to the crucifixion or the Christ ascending. That was a commission, wasn't it?

MR. NERI: No.

MR. MATTESON: It started off --

MR. NERI: It wasn't.

MR. MATTESON: It started off as a free thing?

MR. NERI: You know what did it?

MR. MATTESON: What?

MR. NERI: 1964, moving into a church.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, when you bought this --

MR. NERI: All of a sudden reinvestigating what the hell is religion all about.

MR. MATTESON: I see.

MR. NERI: My religion, you're going back to, you know, the crucifixion.

MR. MATTESON: Right. I just -- for the audience, we should mention that Manuel bought in 1964 an old Protestant church, abandoned Protestant church in Benicia and has made it his home and his studio. And in addition to that, he has yet another studio which is --

MR. NERI: On the other side of town.

MR. MATTESON: -- on the other side of Benicia and which has been a fairly recent thing, hasn't it, that --

MR. NERI: No. I got that space a long time ago also.

MR. MATTESON: Okay, good. Because I've seen many of the plaster -- your working on plaster models with the church windows in here. So I knew you did do some in here, not for a long time.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: Okay. But okay. So this brings up something I -- we were going to get to, and that is sort of the Hispanic roots that you've alluded to earlier. Being a Latino, there's a -- and knowing from firsthand, in my case, what -- what a sensual tradition of -- that's involved in Latino Catholicism, especially in the -- your generation and my generation where before the reforms of 1962 and all those rituals and colors and the whole thing was -- was an extraordinary sensual kind of experience. None of it seems to come out in your work. I mean, the human figure --

MR. NERI: Not directly.

MR. MATTESON: Okay.

MR. NERI: Not directly.

MR. MATTESON: So I want to be proven wrong --

MR. NERI: But indirectly, it flavors everything.

MR. MATTESON: Okay. Tell me how.

MR. NERI: Oh, well, let's go to the female form.

MR. MATTESON: Okay.

MR. NERI: This religion thing, in this kind of -- going to Mexico and really kind of looking into religion a little bit there and this funny thing they have about the Virgin Mary, you look around and talk to people and meet people. And okay, Christ is a given. He's Christ. He's, you know, everything. But the Virgin Mary and what she represents in their life is unbelievable. It -- that kind of -- those kind of fascinations and those kind of interests are always -- they flavored my life. It's still part of me.

MR. MATTESON: And -- but, you know, when I look at your work, I'm thinking the -- the window series I think is where that sensuousness comes out which when I see the human figure that you did the white human figure, it's -- yeah, it's female and so on, but there's a paring down of so much. I'm just trying to find how to come to grips with those two -- those two elements and I can't quite grasp it. Do you -- I know you in your taste for literature, it's Latin and for poetry, it's [Pablo] Neruda and [Frederico] Lorca. Anyone else?

MR. NERI: Oh, everybody.

MR. MATTESON: Everybody?

MR. NERI: Everybody, especially the Latin poets.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah. You read it in Spanish?

MR. NERI: Discovering -- discovering that world was something that changed my life.

MR. MATTESON: Right. In what way? It was --

MR. NERI: What they had to say, you know.

MR. MATTESON: Is it the passion of it?

MR. NERI: Neruda, an unbelievable poet.

MR. MATTESON: And you read it in Spanish, correct?

MR. NERI: Yes. It -- I don't know. It's just hard to explain.

MR. MATTESON: Do you find English poet -- English writers -- poetry by English writers a little tepid by comparison, perhaps?

MR. NERI: Oh, yes.

MR. MATTESON: That's what I'm trying to get at.

MR. NERI: You know, you talk to somebody in our world here in America and you mention [William] Shakespeare and, you know, like their hands go up in this -- this -- who this person represents for them is something extraordinary, good poet, great, but no comparison for me, no comparison.

MR. MATTESON: And with Lorca, I noticed that -- we were talking about this the other day -- you got on to Lorca fairly early. I was saying that --

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: -- the New Directions that I know of -- that I used to have was, I think, published in the mid to late '50s, but you were aware of one well ahead of that, weren't you?

MR. NERI: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MATTESON: Yeah. And what is it about him that -- with Neruda, there's these love sonnets which are extraordinary.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: And that, I think, is what really -- those love sonnets, particularly are the --

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: What is it in Lorca? Which do you -- can you recall what kind of poetry?

MR. NERI: Everything.

MR. MATTESON: Everything that he wrote, okay.

MR. NERI: You know, talk about things in daily life, I mean, you --

MR. MATTESON: Have you read the plays, the Lorca plays?

MR. NERI: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, *Blood Wedding* [1932] --

MR. NERI: Yes, yes.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah. Strong stuff.

MR. NERI: Yes. What those words and the images they conjure up are just fantastic, you know. I'm not strong on language, but poetry and the use of the language by poets and what they do is just fascinating for me.

MR. MATTESON: And you find -- you mentioned in passing yesterday, you find the translations a little bit strange.

MR. NERI: Well, you sure lose a lot, I think.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, there's no question.

MR. NERI: A lot.

MR. MATTESON: The -- so let's get back to this -- this crucifixion figure that you were working on, and that you said was an examination of your own religious background, your own religious experience.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: In what way?

MR. NERI: A reinvestigating or --

MR. MATTESON: What did you find? That it was an important part of you or?

MR. NERI: It certainly was an important part in my early childhood, very much so. You know, I came from family where my father was an agnostic. My mother was still a strong Catholic, and she was the one who sent us off to church, you know. And it was made important for us to be there and be part of that, that religion and understand it.

MR. MATTESON: Did you -- were you a choirboy or altar boy?

MR. NERI: Oh, yes, very much so. But slowly, as I grew up and became -- you know, I started to read and really my mind opened up to other things. Religion was not an answer to everything in my life. You know, when I say I was an altar boy, in those years either I was going to be a Communist agitator or become a priest. I mean, I had these crazy ideas what was going to answer things, you know --

MR. MATTESON: Really?

MR. NERI: -- for me. Thank God, I never became either one. [Laughs.]

MR. MATTESON: I was going to ask you about -- about the politics because of -- I mean, the '60s was a pretty wild --

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: -- time in the Bay Area and there's no political commentary in any of your work, am I right?

MR. NERI: No.

MR. MATTESON: And that's conscious?

MR. NERI: Yes. When all this -- in the '60s when all that was happening around me in San Francisco, all my students were involved in that and talking to me about it, yelling at me to get involved. I was deep into my work at that time, you know. It certainly became part of my work but not consciously, no, not at all. It was -- I don't know. I just accepted it as part of life. This went on, you know. It -- but what happened those years, important things came about because of what took place there. That still touches us very directly today. You know, some of the kids went off and started communes up the coast where they started to grow vegetables and do some -- make furniture and -- and there's that stuff still with us.

MR. MATTESON: In a big way.

MR. NERI: Yeah.

MR. MATTESON: The -- in 1964 or '65, you're hired at [University of California] Davis.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: And you had been teaching, I think, the year before at Berkeley. So that was your first experience of --

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: -- the university in big letters. But the difference -- I don't if I'm putting words in your mouth here, but I would say the difference between the two faculties that you joined --

MR. NERI: A world of difference.

MR. MATTESON: I was going to say that. First of all, they were of your generation, I would say, at Davis.

MR. NERI: The people at Davis, they were my people, you know.

MR. MATTESON: Right.

MR. NERI: I had gone to school with a lot of these -- with Bob Arneson, Roy De Forest, you name it, and some of them were my students.

MR. MATTESON: Which --

MR. NERI: Bill Wiley, you know.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, is that a fact?

MR. NERI: You know, I mean, it's unimportant that they were my students.

MR. MATTESON: Yes.

MR. NERI: We were artists together.

MR. MATTESON: Right.

MR. NERI: And it was just a fantastic world where -- where the people -- it was kind of a depressing scene for me in Berkeley. Not that I was anti what was taking place there or anything, but it wasn't very exciting, you know. There were good people there. Peter Voukos was there still.

MR. MATTESON: But I think he was -- was he in the decorative arts department at the time, or did they have that?

MR. NERI: You had the big ceramic thing there.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, yeah.

MR. NERI: And then a lot of young students, Jim -- I met Jim Melchert there.

MR. MATTESON: Right.

MR. NERI: [Stephen] De Staebler, I met there. You know, those were -- that was the important thing, some of those people I met there.

MR. MATTESON: De Staebler's work is not unlike yours.

MR. NERI: Right.

MR. MATTESON: And what's the influence, do you -- if any? You on him, him on you?

MR. NERI: I don't know. We were just part of this same world there.

MR. MATTESON: You must have had a lot to talk about, I mean.

MR. NERI: Oh, yes, very much so. You know, we didn't worry about looking at each other in a competitive way, no, not at all.

MR. MATTESON: David Simpson, was he there at the same time?

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: This is at Berkeley.

MR. NERI: Yeah, there were some damned good people there.

MR. MATTESON: And David Simpson, I think, he was -- may have been at the Six Gallery at one time or one of those experimental --

MR. NERI: He was around.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. NERI: Yes, everybody came around, even if they didn't show there.

MR. MATTESON: So at Davis, you're amongst a group of artists that you know, and you met Richard Nelson who hired you and --

MR. NERI: Nelson did an extraordinary job, that he really made an effort of going around to see who was there and who was here in the Bay Area, and he picked out the cream of the crop really, as I see it, not just because I was picked but because of my fellow faculty members that I was there that I was very lucky to be -- to have been part of this scene.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah. When you look back on it now, I wonder if you think as I do, that it was just that magic decade and a half or so --

MR. NERI: Right. It -- you know, it just happened there, the right ingredients, and it wasn't just -- the ingredients

weren't just because of the faculty but because of the students.

MR. MATTESON: I was going to bring that up. The graduate record there is just somewhat extraordinary.

MR. NERI: Unbelievable. I remember like sitting in a faculty meetings at the end of the semester and saying, "God, we'll never get a group like that again." And the next year, we were just knocked down again.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. NERI: Just unbelievable.

MR. MATTESON: I used to sit in when I was teaching there. I used to sit in on the -- remember when you were choosing your class, the incoming class, you would get those piles of carousels with the slides in them and you'd just flick them through? Hours of it.

MR. NERI: There were so many great people, just really hard to make choices.

MR. MATTESON: You're right. The thing about it -- we talked yesterday about how in a way it was a kind of Black Mountain College [NC] west in a sense.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: The difference being -- I thought more about this last night. The difference between the two is that there was a commuter element at Davis. So you didn't have a cadre right in the --

MR. NERI: Right.

MR. MATTESON: -- center where these things could even intensify even more. But given that -- that fact, it was - - it was quite an exciting place -- place to be.

MR. NERI: But I think that kind of isolation out there in the valley was an important factor to the whole thing.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. NERI: That it drew us really close. We were desperate. We had to go to each other, you know.

MR. MATTESON: Well, not only that, I suppose, part of it is that the reputation of Davis before the '70s was it was a cow --

MR. NERI: Right.

MR. MATTESON: -- an agricultural college. So even more so.

MR. NERI: There was another element to the whole thing that made it for a fantastic thing to happen there, and that was -- I always have to give thanks to the Russians.

MR. MATTESON: In what way?

MR. NERI: In the '50s, Sputnik went up.

MR. MATTESON: Right.

MR. NERI: And it just really kicked ass with this government, and it scared the hell out of them. And they should have been scared of what took place. And -- not because of bombs or anything like that but just that they were way, scientifically way ahead of us in those elements. Millions of dollars were poured into -- and millions was big money in those days.

MR. MATTESON: That's right.

MR. NERI: Were poured into the university system like in Davis, you know, and around the country. And it was amazing to go visit other departments, especially the engineering department and see what kind of money those guys had to deal with. You went into some of these places where they had new computer systems that had been put up, and there was this huge -- like the church, the space in the church in there -- stacked full of computers. You know, these big, huge things where they were being used to run off things and work with. And going to this engineering department where I told you, I said to the guy, "Listen, I'm here visiting because it's fascinating you can do here what you guys are doing and what you're playing with."

And he'd say, "Oh, yeah, we have great stuff here, just amazing, and here, we got something new here. See, this

machine, we call it a laser. Take one. It's yours, free."

They just gave me a laser, for -- sort of like getting a nuclear bomb nowadays, not that it explodes or anything but for -- you know, but being able to take that back to the department and tell Bruce Naumann about it and people like that, the possibilities of what they could do with an instrument of that sort in the art world.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, yeah.

MR. NERI: Yeah.

MR. MATTESON: The other thing about that is that with their big, big funding, it becomes obsolete within a matter of three years. So it has to be continually re-funded at that -- if not a higher level of funding in the sciences because it's --

MR. NERI: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MATTESON: I mean, the best one could do at Davis was for Tio Giambruni to get his foundry, you know.

MR. NERI: Yes, you're right, and, you know, like that art department at Davis started because these funds, some of it slopped over and they started an art department.

MR. MATTESON: Right.

MR. NERI: And we were hired.

MR. MATTESON: And if you remember, it was those wooden buildings at first plus the graduate student --

MR. NERI: TB-9, I mean.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, TB-9 was aluminum, amazing. The -- what -- any graduate students that stand out in your mind from your Davis experience?

MR. NERI: A lot. And, of course, we'd all hear -- you know, we were talking earlier about things like Debbie Butterfield, Bruce Naumann, you know, the obvious big names that came out of that department, but we -- what we don't hear about are some of these great people who came out of it who went into other fields with this kind of thing that they got out of that department and went into doing great things. You know, one kid ran off -- forget his name -- but started designing great Japanese cars, for Christ's sakes, things of that sort, you know.

MR. MATTESON: Really?

MR. NERI: Some kid was playing with numbers and went on -- and when that digital thing started up, he was grouping numbers in this fantastic way. There he was, head of the list. I mean, unbelievable, it's those young people who were unheard of, you know, that were our heroes also that came out of that department.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah. Did you ever find the communication among your fellow artists at Davis -- did you talk -- I don't know. I mean, I never seemed to have remembered -- except with Roy. I have to say he was -- talked anything about art history, not that it was -- but when I say art history, I don't mean the academic thing but talking about old art. Roy had this wonderful phrase that what we art historians at Davis did was "recycled art" and you in the studio did art. We did recycled art.

But do you remember, you know, any kind of interchange, consistent interchange about who you were looking at?

MR. NERI: I was always fascinated by that, talking to my fellow artists there, I mean the faculty, and their interest -- let's say when you say art history and what they thought was important. And here they're looking at things that happened or people, artists who I'd never heard of.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, is that so? Well, Roy was good at that.

MR. NERI: Yeah, especially Roy. You know, you're right.

MR. MATTESON: [Alexander] Calder's illustrators or *Saturday Evening Post*.

MR. NERI: I'd never looked at -- and here they're bringing up these people and discovering how important they really were in what they did, you know. It's amazing.

MR. MATTESON: And Wayne did the same thing --

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: -- too, because he knew all that Disney material.

MR. NERI: It was always great getting together and starting discussing, and, you know, when that talk started, that was my time to listen.

[END TR 01 DISC 02.]

MR. MATTESON: Yeah. Manuel, I want to go back to this Hispanic thing for a second.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: The -- we were talking about you have been in several Hispanic reviews, exhibitions that deal with the Hispanic community. Did you see yourself in -- when you saw your work in that context, did you see it as a little bit different or was there some connection there that you --

MR. NERI: No, not at all. As I've said before, I've stepped away from that world that I once was -- I was very much part of.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. NERI: You know, I lived -- grew up in a home where we spoke Spanish and our friends all were Spanish speaking. That is almost over with, you know.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah. Did you find it a liberation, an emancipation?

MR. NERI: No, it's just a different world. This new world really opened up the rest of the world to me, you know. It's fantastic.

MR. MATTESON: Do you think -- I mean, do you think that other Latino artists might be restricted by that -- by that --

MR. NERI: I don't know. I don't know but --

MR. MATTESON: I mean a kind of self-imposed provinciality, perhaps.

MR. NERI: What is referred to as Latino art, I don't connect with.

MR. MATTESON: Like Carlos Almaraz --

MR. NERI: No.

MR. MATTESON: -- it doesn't mean -- it doesn't -- how about Robert Graham, he --

MR. NERI: Oh, yeah, that's --

MR. MATTESON: He, like you, has focused on the female figure, primarily the female figure, and really, there's nothing you could say that there was Latino about his --

MR. NERI: Right, right.

MR. MATTESON: -- work. It's not self-consciously any of that, and you pretty much are in that league.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: That -- that manner, that camp of thinking, yeah. Well, that's interesting.

MR. NERI: Robert Graham is an old student.

MR. MATTESON: Is that a fact? Where was this? At --

MR. NERI: At the Art Institute.

MR. MATTESON: I didn't know he went there.

MR. NERI: A very -- I think he just went to take my class, as a matter of fact.

MR. MATTESON: Is that so? Did you -- do you remember him as a student?

MR. NERI: Oh, yes.

MR. MATTESON: And did you speak Spanish with one another, probably?

MR. NERI: Not really, not really, no. No, we get along great together. We -- we -- you know, he wanted to get -- he wanted to get into the figure. He wanted to get a different view of what the figure was all about, you know, as far as I was concerned, which was great. But, you know, the class was a beginning figure class, and we really -- I wanted to bring as much information into it for him as possible besides what I had to say about it.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah. The -- to talk about your -- again about your teaching, the kind of students that you find -- you found since you retired -- you took early retirement. When was it that you stopped teaching to --

MR. NERI: Ninety-one.

MR. MATTESON: Ninety-one. Did you find that -- especially with graduate students who seem to be more focused on what they want, did you find that the figure was an -- was -- figurative art generally was attractive to a large part of them or were people -- did you find them dismissive of the figure?

MR. NERI: Well, it's always a fascination for everybody in all kinds of ways, you know, from -- you know, right from the sexual part on up.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, yeah.

MR. NERI: And, of course, you know, a lot of my students there, also at Davis especially, they were in pre-med, you know.

MR. MATTESON: Oh.

MR. NERI: And a lot of these people came into my sculpture class and they were making teeth, for God's sakes and things of that sort.

MR. MATTESON: We encountered that as USC [University of Southern California], too.

MR. NERI: Oh, yeah, and I would try to direct, you know, not take those ideas away from them but bring more into it they could play with.

MR. MATTESON: So there was a rapport. I mean --

MR. NERI: Oh, yes.

MR. MATTESON: -- that you thought -- did you find that surprising?

MR. NERI: At first, yes. You know, I didn't -- when I was first confronted with my first tooth, I didn't know what the hell to do, first tooth in a big class anyway of sculpture.

MR. MATTESON: Yes, how interesting. You -- when you first married, you married a woman by the name of Hampson [ph].

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: She was an Anglo.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: And how did that world feel to you? I mean, here you were all of a sudden with in-laws, Anglo in-laws from a small northern California town.

MR. NERI: Well, yes, Crescent City.

MR. MATTESON: Crescent City.

MR. NERI: Her father was from New Mexico.

MR. MATTESON: Oh.

MR. NERI: And there was a connection there with us, and her mother was very Irish. I mean, not that she had any Latino real connection about her at all, no.

MR. MATTESON: It was Catholic.

MR. NERI: Catholic, you know. You know, Catholicism from the Irish side.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, which is altogether different.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: Altogether different, yeah.

MR. NERI: It was -- I don't know. I was fascinated by this strange woman, you know, from another world, practically, for me.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah. I mean, it would have seemed to me that it would have been quite exotic, actually.

MR. NERI: Well, yeah, we met in art school, and then once we got together and married and I kept art -- kept on with art school. She started yelling at me about going to work at the post office, and I say, "Hey, listen, I've just got to finish this whole thing I've gotten into." So she left.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah. We're joined here by Mary Julia Klimenko. Did I pronounce that correctly?

MARY JULIA KLIMENKO: Pardon?

MR. MATTESON: Klimenko?

MS. KLIMENKO: Klimenko, that's right.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, okay. Who has been Manuel's model since 1972 and continues to be and I -- I saw yesterday -- we saw together, actually, the reliefs and some of the things that we -- which we'll talk about in a second.

Manuel has told us how you first met and -- and has told us a little bit about the procedure of the studio, the poetry reading and so on. And as a consequence because of this, you yourself became a poet.

MS. KLIMENKO: No.

MR. MATTESON: You didn't?

MS. KLIMENKO: No.

MR. MATTESON: How was it that it came about that, that you started --

MS. KLIMENKO: It came about because I -- my analyst, my Jungian analyst said -- even though I was very much involved with Manuel, I adored him. You know, I actually used to save his little cigars when he was finished with them. She said, "Well, what are you going to do?"

I said, "What do you mean, what am I going to do? I'm doing all of this stuff."

And she said, "No. You have to get a job or go to school." Because she said, "You don't have an identity. He has an identity, but you don't have an identity. Who are you?"

So I went to school as a major in -- so I could get a job. It was out of a question. I went to school, then majored in psychology. Then I had to -- you know, you get these little fillers. You don't want to drive home from school and you have to -- so you think, I'll just pick up three more units, and I decided poetry would be an easy A. And --

MR. MATTESON: Everyone thinks things are easy As. Yours was an art class in engineering. You were taking the engineering curriculum.

MS. KLIMENKO: Right.

MR. MATTESON: And took the art class for an easy A.

MS. KLIMENKO: Right. So I --

MR. MATTESON: And so did you.

MS. KLIMENKO: I took the -- I enrolled, and the first assignment was to go to the library and bring in a poetry book, and I didn't know anything about poetry. I hadn't even read any poetry. So I just pulled a book off the

shelf, and it happened to be Pablo Neruda, and I just burst into tears. I didn't know anyone felt like me. I thought I was this lone duck out here, and so I went into the studio. I think I was seeing you every day then. And I told Manuel that I had to write a poem for a class, for this class that I was taking and I didn't know how. And so I would throw out words and lines, and Manuel helped me. And he would go, "No, no, no, no." And I'd say a few more words. "Oh, no." Then I'd say a word, and he'd go, "Yeah, that -- that'll work."

And do you remember that first poem?

MR. NERI: Oh, yes.

MS. KLIMENKO: It was called "Dog". "I've got this dead dog in my chest, see, and don't you try and take him out. He keeps beer in the refrigerator and my lips warm and hungry." And that's what I took to class with --

MR. MATTESON: So was it you who introduced Neruda to Manuel?

MS. KLIMENKO: No, he -- I brought that book, and he knew -- I didn't know that Manuel loved poetry, and what I discovered accidentally because of that happening is that Manuel loved poetry and -- very much. And then I discovered that I could bring poetry -- I could bring more than my body. I could bring poets in, and that became a part of the fabric of the interior. I mean, we live a life inside the studio that runs parallel to a life outside of the studio. And so that's when I just started -- because, of course, I was enchanted and wanted to please you in every way and would just comb through stacks of books in used bookstores to find things to read but -- I mean, I didn't realize for a long time what a benefit it was to me, too.

I was trying to give Manuel -- and then at the same time, I began writing poetry like crazy. Initially, I was writing 10, 12 poems a day, and you were always more interested in what I wrote. And then for a little while, we had a big battle about whether or not you were going to correct my poetry and then we had --

MR. NERI: You would have killed me if I had said one word to you about --

MS. KLIMENKO: You wrote -- one time I came into the studio and you said, "I hope you don't mind. I fixed this up a little bit." And there were lines through some of my lines.

MR. MATTESON: Well, you know there's a great precedent for that. Ezra Pound corrected T.S. Eliot for "The Wasteland" [1922], and it became a greater poem.

MS. KLIMENKO: I looked at him -- now, today I think besides me being a model, I think we can make a case for being collaborators in art now for well over a couple of decades almost now, but at that time, I was the model and bringing in poetry. And I looked at that, and I said, "You" -- in fact, this was about 1989 because I said, "You -- you wrote on my poetry."

And he said, "Well, I just fixed it up a little bit."

And I said, "Well, wait a minute. You actually picked up that" -- and I said, "How would you like me to pick up an axe and fix your sculpture?"

MR. NERI: You did sometimes.

MS. KLIMENKO: And -- no --

MR. MATTESON: Oh, did that happen?

MS. KLIMENKO: No. I picked up an axe and broke a mirror.

MR. MATTESON: Oh.

MS. KLIMENKO: I'll tell you that story. I didn't break the sculpture. I did pick up an axe and break a mirror. But he followed -- I stomped off. He followed me out, and his parting shot to me was, "It's just a fucking piece of paper."

And I was, like, screaming obscenities. I don't know. And so I called Anne Kohs, and I said, "I'm never speaking to him again, ever speaking to him again, never."

And so she let it -- Anne is so conflict avoidant, and when she deals with us, I swear she gets ulcers. So --

MR. MATTESON: This is --

MS. KLIMENKO: So she let it --

MR. MATTESON: Anne Kohs is the --

MS. KLIMENKO: Anne Kohs is Manuel's manager.

MR. NERI: -- manager, business manager, agent. And so six months went by, we didn't speak, and Anne called me up one day. And she -- Anne's great at finding the hook. She said -- she had an office at the time on Sutter Street, and she said, "How would you like to make a book of poetry?"

Well, I mean, now I'm at San Francisco State. I'm finally working at my master's degree in creative writing, and I was enchanted with the idea. And she said, "Well, be here on Tuesday at noon, and we'll talk about it. I think we can do that."

So I was right there in the office, beautiful office. Anne has lovely spaces, and so I'm in this office. And she turns, comes out of her office. She says, "Manuel will be here in about ten minutes."

I said, "What?"

She said, "Manuel will be here in about ten minutes."

I said, "I'm never speaking to him again. "

She said, "We'll see."

And that was how *Territory* [San Diego: Brighton Press, 1993] came to be made, the very first book, is that Manuel also had been asked to come to the office to talk about making a book. Well, the minute he walks through the door, as always, it doesn't matter what we've said to each other before, it's just like that instant connection is back. It's like no time has transpired. Nothing has changed, and we just start rolling again. I don't think we ever even talked about it. We just started off again as if not ten minutes had gone by, and we made that book.

MR. MATTESON: I want to get to the books, actually. And so was the book Anne's idea to do this illustrated -- an illustrated book?

MR. NERI: I had talked to Anne. Well, first, I'd shown her some of your poetry, you know, to convince her that you were writing some damned good stuff, and then I said something about maybe illustrating because I thought you needed to publish some -- some poetry. So I said, how about if I illustrate some of these books.

MS. KLIMENKO: But, you see, that's a word you use that is really inaccurate, and it really shouldn't go down on the record.

MR. NERI: All right. I know you disagree --

MS. KLIMENKO: Manuel does not -- nobody agrees. Manuel does not illustrate my books. They are clearly collaborative works, and his work is every bit as -- I mean, they -- they balance each other off and they play off of each other. If you look -- and what's really interesting is anyone who wants to know about my relationship with Manuel or his to me, all they have to do is look at the art and read the poetry, and that's what the books do. They put it together. So you're being generous and kind, I know, when you say illustrate, but really I can't bear that because your art is so important to those books.

MR. MATTESON: The -- you write the poetry and then you illustrate it after the fact or do you --

MR. NERI: Well, what you saw in the studio here --

MR. MATTESON: Yes.

MR. NERI: -- that's a different series of books where I'm using old photographs of hers to paint on that will go into these books.

MR. MATTESON: You've done that before in another book, haven't you?

MR. NERI: Probably so, yeah.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, I think --

MS. KLIMENKO: No, we -- that --

MR. NERI: This is something new.

MS. KLIMENKO: The photographs you see in the studio were done by [M.] Lee Fatherree in the '70s, the late '70s because Manuel and I were going to make a book at that time and --

MR. MATTESON: I see.

MS. KLIMENKO: -- Manuel went to Italy, and I posed for all of those photographs. And then we had one of our little falling-outs, and so we never made the book. But --

MR. MATTESON: I see.

MS. KLIMENKO: -- the photographs just hung around because I signed no release for them. Manuel essentially has no claim to them, and Lee, you know, only owns the --

MR. MATTESON: The copyright.

MS. KLIMENKO: -- the copyright. So -- so we -- that eventually -- that became the third book, and the first book, *Territory* -- you see, all of the images existed and all of the poetry existed before the books were made and neither --

MR. MATTESON: Okay.

MS. KLIMENKO: -- in no case was anything made for the book.

MR. MATTESON: I see. Okay.

MS. KLIMENKO: So they were --

MR. MATTESON: That straightens that out.

MS. KLIMENKO: -- gathered and put together.

MR. NERI: Yeah, my old drawings, her old poetry came together --

MR. MATTESON: I see.

MR. NERI: -- in the books.

MR. MATTESON: And then a superb binding.

MR. NERI: And, of course, you know, drawings of her.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, yeah.

MS. KLIMENKO: Because I'm modeling for you.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah. So how did you find this process for you, Mary Julia?

MS. KLIMENKO: Making the books?

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MS. KLIMENKO: Well, the one thing that I said I wanted was that I wanted it in cowhide in red if possible, and so there are about 10 or 15 in red cowhide because Manuel and I always had a running argument of sorts where he said that he used the female figure as his landscape. And I said, "No. You use my body as your territory."

MR. MATTESON: Oh, I see. That's where the title came from.

MS. KLIMENKO: And so I said I want it branded like a brand, territory, into this cowhide, this red cowhide, and it turned out that they were skins of baby things on the sides of hills in France that took -- it was awful. So we went to a cloth binder -- a cloth cover, but that was the original. And those drawings existed, and so did the poetry.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MS. KLIMENKO: And then -- no. Okay. When did we do *She Said [I Tell You It Doesn't Hurt Me]*. San Diego: Brighton Press, 1990]? Was that the second book? Yes.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MS. KLIMENKO: Okay. Then this -- in the second book, Kathleen Fraser -- when I was at San Francisco State, because we're always married to somebody, although I think we're both single now as far as I know. We -- we should check, but we -- I would write poems and then hand them in. I was taking a class called Feminist Poetics

from Kathleen Fraser at San Francisco State and then talking to her in the hallway because we were the same age, and we would kind of gossip in the hallway. And I would talk to her about my great love Manuel Neri, and I have this husband and I love him so much. And she said, "You know, the things you told me in the hallway are so much more interesting than what you're handing in."

And I said, "Well, I -- you can see why I can't write these things."

And she said, "Well, I'll tell you what." She said, "There is a woman named Frida Kahlo or was a woman named Frida Kahlo, and she was married to an artist named Diego Rivera. And there are strong parallels between those two and you two." And she said, "So you could take on the persona of Frida Kahlo and speak to Manuel."

And this was before the Hayden Herrera book came out. Frida Kahlo --

MR. NERI: It's a great idea.

MS. KLIMENKO: -- was virtually unknown. I went to the library, and I had to get a biography of Diego Rivera in which there were three lines about Frida Kahlo. That was it.

MR. MATTESON: She's an industry now.

MS. KLIMENKO: And then -- and, yeah, it made me mad that afterwards people thought that I was part of that whole cult thing when I had written these long before anybody knew -- basically, it's a foil for me to talk to Manuel. And so she said I tell you it doesn't hurt me.

Those poems existed almost 20 year -- well, at least 15 years before the book. And then Manuel made etchings of my head down at Brighton Press where I still don't think they've recovered because I don't think Manuel -- Manuel wanted to cut, you know, with a saw the etchings, the -- and he kept snapping saw blades, and they were -- and I was reading poetry, and he was --

MR. NERI: I was cutting the copperplates.

MR. MATTESON: With a saw?

MR. NERI: Yeah.

MS. KLIMENKO: Yes. And they kept running down to the hardware store and buying more blades. They wanted to please him. They wanted to give the artist what the artist needed to work. They're that committed, and I'm just reading poetry, watching these -- I'm used to this stuff, you know.

MR. NERI: Well, I was doing strange things there with, you know --

MS. KLIMENKO: They've never been done.

MR. NERI: And, you know, tearing those prints by hand.

MS. KLIMENKO: Well, then you decided later that you were going to tear them by hand, that -- that where the pieces were cut out, and that actually, what was said later that it gives it a sculptural element because they're -- they're torn, and you can see Manuel's, you know -- so those etchings actually were done at the time of the book and long after the Frida Kahlo poems.

But "I tell you it doesn't hurt me" was the line I stole off of your table which you forgot was on your table until I told you.

MR. NERI: That -- that line came out of a movie I --

MR. MATTESON: What's the line?

MR. NERI: I tell you it doesn't hurt me.

MR. MATTESON: Oh.

MS. KLIMENKO: That's the --

MR. NERI: I forget the name of the movie, but it's an Argentine movie I saw when I was a kid.

MS. KLIMENKO: And it was on his -- written on his table, and so I changed it to "she said -- she said I tell you it doesn't hurt me." And there are, what, ten of those poems.

MR. NERI: Actually, you know, the movie's about this poet.

MS. KLIMENKO: Really?

MR. NERI: And the poet is there with this woman who's leaving him, and he takes this pen, you know, the old writing pen, sticks it in his arm like this. Then he says, "I tell you it doesn't hurt me."

MS. KLIMENKO: Doesn't hurt me, oh.

MR. NERI: That impressed me as a kid so I wrote it down.

MR. MATTESON: I think it would me, too.

MS. KLIMENKO: The time that I broke the -- the time that I broke the mirror is that -- Manuel's had so many girlfriends, honest to God. At his funeral, there's going to be about 350 women with 82 --

MR. NERI: I wish that were true.

MS. KLIMENKO: They're all going to have journals under their arm saying, "But I -- but we were in love. I'm the one."

It's going to be hysterical. I'm going to sit in the back and watch. But -- but he let -- he was going with this particular woman, and none of these women knew about our relationship because he would say, "Oh, you know, she's just the model."

And so they treated me like I was a doorknob, and they -- and I didn't tell because I was married so I couldn't tell. And so one night, I was -- we used to work very late at night, and I was modeling. And this woman arrived, and she -- he let -- he brought her in, and he let her sit down. I'm nude. I've never taken off my clothes for anybody before or posed and down any of that, and she sits there and watches the entire time like I'm posing and he's working.

And a couple of hours -- and I am seething. I am so angry. So she leaves, and, of course, Manuel's going to play it off like he always does. We just don't talk about it. We don't have discussions. We're just, like, skip right over it. And I picked up an axe, and I -- he had a whole wall that was a mirror, one a solid sheet of glass.

MR. MATTESON: That was a big crash.

MS. KLIMENKO: So he could see -- he could see the sculptures from other angles.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, I see.

MS. KLIMENKO: And the sculptures were in front, and then when I'd pose, he could see me from other angles because I would pose in the midst of the sculptures.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, I didn't know this existed --

MS. KLIMENKO: He usually worked on six or seven at the same time. And I picked up that axe and swung it at that thing, and it -- I was fascinated because all --

MR. NERI: You're lucky you didn't kill yourself, you know that?

MS. KLIMENKO: -- the glass -- it was like rain. It was just like raining. And then you grabbed me by my hair which was to my waist, and you drug me into the living room because we were so mad at each other. But then in about five seconds, we weren't mad at each other, and we were -- I won't say on the tape recorder. But nonetheless, we weren't mad at each other, but there was never another woman in that studio, you know, to --

MR. MATTESON: Huh. Is -- so are you -- you're planning another book, the Lorca --

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: -- and have the poems been selected for that?

MR. NERI: Yes.

MS. KLIMENKO: We are? I haven't heard about it. I -- I know that --

MR. NERI: Maybe -- oh, no, I guess they haven't been selected.

MS. KLIMENKO: We did -- we did she said --

MR. NERI: No --

MS. KLIMENKO: -- the last ones we did were cross -- the last book we did was *Crossings* [Berkeley, California: Editions Koch, 2002], and then you did a Neruda book that Thomas Ingmire did the calligraphy for. And then --

MR. MATTESON: Which is gorgeous.

MS. KLIMENKO: Yeah.

MR. NERI: Thank you.

MS. KLIMENKO: And then the Lorca book, and I wrote the introductions to those. And I'm not aware that we are going to -- that we're going to write any -- that we're going to do another one. What I was fascinated to discover is that the -- I didn't know this. I took on a persona. I found a J. [M.] W. Turner, a sketchbook on a sale table at Pegasus Books in Berkeley, and I loved the -- he went to an island named Folkestone [England] towards the end of his life, and he did these beautiful pastels. And I took on the persona of this woman writing from this island to this man, and it was now 20 years between the Frida Kahlo poems and the -- and I had made no connections.

So the *Crossings* book are ten of these letters that I wrote, again not intending it to be a book or anything, but I just wrote them. What I realized later after we -- when we were looking at the book several times, I realized the persona is the same woman 20 years older, and you can really see that. You can see how she's grown and how she's shifted, and you don't -- I don't think a poet takes on a persona. I mean can make up a persona. I really think it's allowing an aspect of one's self to give voice. I mean to give voice.

MR. MATTESON: Where does the word crossings -- I mean, why is using that -- that title?

MS. KLIMENKO: Well, because we're always double-crossing each other. [They laugh.]

MR. MATTESON: I see.

MS. KLIMENKO: And --

MR. MATTESON: Enough said. You don't have to explicate. And I wanted to ask you, Manuel, about your working methods and this mirror is a good -- that Mary Julia brought up is a good foil to start. You -- when did you start using this mirror, and do you still do it?

MR. NERI: As soon as I could afford it.

MR. MATTESON: I see, yeah. But it was an idea that you had?

MR. NERI: I kind of wanted to catch a perspective, not just a different view of it where it reversed the image, you know.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MR. NERI: And I saw the figure I was working on from a different perspective, in a different setting.

MR. MATTESON: And I didn't see any mirror in the studio this -- yesterday.

MR. NERI: I do have one, yeah.

MR. MATTESON: You do have one, okay. And you --

MR. NERI: Not big like the other one.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, okay. You've learned your lesson. The -- the -- and then you worked -- she mentioned -- Mary Julia just mentioned that you were working on several statues at the same time.

MR. NERI: I always work -- I try to work on at least four at a time.

MR. MATTESON: Oh.

MR. NERI: And that's mainly because I don't want to try and put too many ideas into one, put one idea into it and explore the possibilities of that idea, where I have these other same figures where I can switch each ideas back and forth.

MS. KLIMENKO: But also, Manuel --

MR. NERI: Try different possibilities.

MS. KLIMENKO: You -- Manuel works very quickly. When -- he may have ideas that he puts in his sketchbooks and such, but one of the things that happens when he's working on four or six or seven and the plaster's wet and it has to go is, you don't have time to intellectualize. You don't have time to jump up into your ego. You're moving, and he works very fast.

MR. NERI: That's -- the plaster makes me really go at it.

MS. KLIMENKO: Right, right, and so --

MR. NERI: Because I have that limited time.

MS. KLIMENKO: And so you've got this kind of spread-out and quick, and so what happens is that immediacy is what you see, you know, like the fingers drag across as he's going -- which I just was saying that because you -- when you say your ideas and such, it may sound like you actually, like, intellectually approach your work --

MR. NERI: No.

MS. KLIMENKO: -- and you don't. You come right at it from your gut.

MR. MATTESON: So it's -- it's -- the ideas sort of emerge from the process.

MR. NERI: Yes, but because of that immediacy, because of that urgency that develops at that point, I try to get away from that, so I try to think the thing out, you know, and just reacting to what's taking place.

MR. MATTESON: Okay.

MR. NERI: And working from that point of view.

MR. MATTESON: Now, explain to me --

MR. NERI: Because I really believe in that point I made to you before where I really believe that -- that art comes from inside of us and not the head necessarily, not words and things but all our feelings, you know, come out. And that's what I want to react to.

MR. MATTESON: Now, how do you explain the reworkings when you go back to a figure that you've abandoned or left alone as perfectly satisfying --

MR. NERI: I love that.

MR. MATTESON: -- three, four years ago, maybe even longer, and you come back and redo parts of it? It's a nightmare --

MR. NERI: Here I am with, you know, a load of stuff in my head that's new, and I want to dump it on that old stuff.

MR. MATTESON: I see.

MR. NERI: And you noticed that I -- I have no -- none of my work hanging up --

MR. MATTESON: I noticed that.

MR. NERI: -- on my walls. That's because I can't keep my hands off the stuff, you know.

MR. MATTESON: I see.

MR. NERI: If I have something up there, I can't resist taking it down and doing something with it.

MR. MATTESON: Really?

MR. NERI: And, you know, some of that old work, I really want to leave it alone.

MR. MATTESON: So the better -- as soon as it gets out of studio, it's gone. You don't call it back, say -- you've never, say, go back to an owner and say, "I'd like to redo this"?

MR. NERI: No.

MR. MATTESON: Okay. It's gone.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: But if it sticks around in the studio, it's fair game.

MR. NERI: But I've done that also where I've gone to somebody's house and there's something there, and I've begged to borrow it for a while. I mean, I like the results, but the people aren't necessarily --

MR. MATTESON: Happy about it.

MR. NERI: -- happy about it.

MR. MATTESON: Yes. It makes cataloguers really frustrated because they don't know when to date the bloody thing, yeah. But you're talking about the immediacy of -- of plaster and now you've been working with marble which resists that kind of thing quite -- quite a bit.

MR. NERI: Oh, completely.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah. So you're working in an opposite way.

MR. NERI: Here's a material that brings something to the -- it brings itself. There's something in there that -- the fascination of opening up -- going into that stone and here's, you know, that world of the stone and what it has to present to you.

MR. MATTESON: Now --

MR. NERI: It's alive there.

MR. MATTESON: -- let's talk about you and Carrara. You've been -- you first went to Carrara, what year was that in Italy?

MR. NERI: In '75.

MR. MATTESON: And you were smitten.

MR. NERI: Yes, completely.

MR. MATTESON: And you bought a studio, and you bought an apartment there.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: And you go back there --

MR. NERI: Every year.

MR. MATTESON: -- every year for a period of three or four months.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: And that's usually over the summer and the fall.

MR. NERI: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MATTESON: Yeah. So tell me about what you find about Carrara that's so -- about that --

MR. NERI: Well --

MR. MATTESON: I mean, you have a lot of good precedents.

MR. NERI: -- for one thing, let me make a point again of what I told you. You know, around the corner from me a block and a half away is the house where Michelangelo [Buonarroti] lived.

MR. MATTESON: Right.

MR. NERI: And he went there for the same reasons I'm going there, for the stone. I mean, that kind of history surrounds me there. That alone is, like, fascinating to me. And that world of the marble that, you know, it's -- the

ground there is just littered with history, and, you know, those -- those hills were being quarried before the Romans showed up. It's amazing.

MR. MATTESON: Did -- and there's a community of marble. There's a cult of marble. Do you work with assistants there?

MR. NERI: No.

MR. MATTESON: You just buy the stone raw?

MR. NERI: I go to the quarries and buy stone or to the segarias [ph] -- by segarias is a place where they cut and finish stone. And these are mainly their reject out of those systems. In the quarries, they're cutting stone out that a certain size that are going to fit -- it's going to -- those lumps are going to fit the equipment where the stone is being cut and prepared. Anything that doesn't fit is a throwaway, and it's, like, dirt cheap.

MR. MATTESON: I was surprised to learn yesterday in conversations in the studio that there are different qualities of Carrara marble, and you don't necessarily get the high quality ones, the highest quality.

MR. NERI: I don't necessarily -- let's say their top grade is what they call statuario, statuary marble. I'm not really necessarily crazy about that. There's so many other stones there. Bardiglio, you know, is one stone that it's the bottom of the list where nobody thinks -- none of the Italians think much of it, but I think it's great.

MR. MATTESON: This is the one with stripes in it, sort of?

MR. NERI: Mm-hmm [affirmative], that gray that I showed you.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, and that's what you primarily work in?

MR. NERI: Not primarily. I work with it, but I'm looking for a stone that has something for me to work with it in it, you know, which makes it completely different as far as working with plaster. You know, plaster is a blah material.

MR. MATTESON: The marble that we saw yesterday, well, most of it's characterized by an absolutely superbly refined surface with chisel marks in it or pneumatic drill marks, pneumatic chisels to be more accurate. How do you explain the -- I mean, you just said -- you mentioned it earlier that it's the stone speaking to you in a sense. But do you see this is a large stylistic departure from your earlier work, or do you consider it all one sort of main --

MR. NERI: Oh, it's quite different. The way I -- what I'm after in the stone and how I use the stone is completely different from the usual, you know.

MR. MATTESON: How does the marble take paint because you paint some of them?

MR. NERI: Fine.

MR. MATTESON: It does?

MR. NERI: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MATTESON: You don't have to use a special kind of paint?

MR. NERI: You've got to remember the Greeks painted everything.

MR. MATTESON: That's correct. That's right.

MR. NERI: You know, and if it needed another paint coat that year, they repainted.

MR. MATTESON: Right.

MS. KLIMENKO: But when you started painting in -- there, the Italians were shocked.

MR. NERI: I know. They would walk across town to come over and visit my studio and say, "What are you doing to our sculpture" -- I mean -- "to our stone?"

Didn't I pay for this?

MS. KLIMENKO: And when you first went to visit Arnaldo Pomodoro when you were unknown and he was quite known, and we were received. He gave us an audience for about ten minutes. And he looked at Manuel, and he

said, "Don't you understand that in Italy plaster is for a maquette, we don't make sculptures out of plaster, only their models."

And Manuel said, "Well, it's been nice talking to you."

And off we went, and I was so thrilled the other night that -- I mean, you received this award.

MR. NERI: Now we're really close friends.

MS. KLIMENKO: Right.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, you are?

MR. NERI: Oh, yes.

MR. MATTESON: With Pomodoro?

MS. KLIMENKO: Yeah, they both received the award from the International Sculpture Society for lifetime achievement last year and Pomodoro --

MR. NERI: Yeah, that lifetime, he received one --

MS. KLIMENKO: -- this year. But Manuel was -- my whole point is I wanted you to get in how you shocked the Italians with both plaster and painting on marble when he first started.

MR. NERI: Well, you know, it --

MR. MATTESON: It takes an outsider to break conventions.

MR. NERI: You know, we'd tell the Italians, "Hey, the Greeks painted everything."

You know, and they would say things like, "They had no respect."

MS. KLIMENKO: And you never backed down.

MR. NERI: So actually, I was being told that I had no respect.

MS. KLIMENKO: You never backed down.

MR. NERI: No, no way.

MR. MATTESON: Now, the relief -- the reliefs that you're doing now, how long have you been doing the reliefs?

MR. NERI: Oh, always, all along. Those relief ideas really came out of the -- the early years of working in clay.

MR. MATTESON: Oh, I see.

MR. NERI: You know, when you're work in clay, you can't make the little -- have things standing on two little ankles.

MR. MATTESON: Right. That's right, yeah. And so you've -- these -- what I saw yesterday are bronze. They're cast from the plaster?

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: And they're attached to the -- to the background.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: And I see some extraordinary poses that Mary Julia is --

MR. NERI: Yeah, there she is.

MS. KLIMENKO: But you actually, I mean, made those -- I was up against the plaster, I mean.

MR. MATTESON: You were -- you were actually --

MS. KLIMENKO: I was actually --

MR. MATTESON: -- stuck to the plaster in a way?

MS. KLIMENKO: Yes. I mean, he -- he did it all the same time.

MR. MATTESON: And the wall becomes a kind of field for paint, too. And in many ways, it goes back to some of that abstract painting that you used to do in the late '50s.

MR. NERI: Yes, very much so.

MR. MATTESON: And is that -- that's consciously --

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: -- you're thinking that way?

MR. NERI: And as you can see, you know, it's not true relief work of figure.

MR. MATTESON: Yes.

MR. NERI: I take a lot of liberties with the figure.

MR. MATTESON: Are you looking -- the art historian in me is starting to click, click, click with the precedents. But are you looking at, say, things like the Elgin Marbles that you --

MR. NERI: Of course. That's what -- you know, as I saying yesterday, you know, first I went directly -- I mean, my first trip to Europe was one of those stop in there -- the museum in London.

MR. MATTESON: The British Museum.

MR. NERI: The British Museum and it knocked me out. It knocked me out. And I realized that the figure, so much stronger a lot of times with missing arms and legs and heads.

MR. MATTESON: I was coming to that, yeah, these partial figures.

MR. NERI: And, you know, that's where I got it from. The figure was saying so much more in such a stronger way.

MS. KLIMENKO: Never intended to butcher women as has been suggested.

MR. NERI: No, no, no.

MR. MATTESON: The -- someone has written an essay. Albert Ellison [ph] years ago wrote an essay on the partial figure as -- as one of the iconic moments in the history of sculpture when that became -- where the fragment becomes more powerful than the whole. And that you find that to be true?

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: Very much so. And some of your latest work where you just do the feet or the ankles --

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: -- and the knees below are very powerful.

MR. NERI: Thank you.

MR. MATTESON: I mean, they're -- I find them really to be really, enormously --

MR. NERI: You know, another early piece I went to see especially is a piece made by Michelangelo. I went to Sforza Museum in Milan, and they have this sculpture, Michelangelo where it says -- a Madonna, you know. And it was obviously made -- the sculpture -- the stone came from a block probably from -- that broke off a larger piece he was working on. So there's this huge -- what is it, a leg or an arm?

MR. MATTESON: I think it's an arm.

MR. NERI: Arm that's next to this figure he carved, and it does a fantastic -- this huge lump of an arm and next to this figure, it's just fantastic.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah.

MS. KLIMENKO: And isn't there the sculpture in the same museum where *David* [c. 1504] is in Florence where --

that one where it's all -- it's not in balance at all? You love it.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MS. KLIMENKO: It's like it's coming -- there's like a stone and it's sort of --

MR. MATTESON: It's emerging out.

MS. KLIMENKO: -- emerging --

MR. MATTESON: It's the slaves which were left unfinished.

MS. KLIMENKO: Yes, exactly, and Manuel's always loved that.

MR. MATTESON: I can understand. Yeah, that's good stuff. The -- and, in fact, this -- this idea of the unfinished work which, quote, unfinished is something which figures in in a lot of -- a lot of modern sculpture, and you obviously partake of that -- of that tradition.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: This refined surface of the marble, does that -- it doesn't -- you don't find it too refined for -- given your plaster history, you know, where there was just the --

MR. NERI: Mine or others -- other people's?

MR. MATTESON: Yours, yours.

MR. NERI: I -- I'm not interested in presenting a completely cleaned up piece of stone.

MR. MATTESON: Because that is -- I mean, no heads usually and chiseled and broken.

MR. NERI: And I love having, let's say, a sculpture where there are, you know -- done different things to the stone that say different things, that draw your attention in different ways to the -- to what's happening there. Certain polished area which you are drawn to and then there's a lot of, like, literally broken surfaces that are presenting the stone in a different manner or other areas that have a heavy, textured surface.

MR. MATTESON: Do you break the stone, or do you leave it?

MR. NERI: I break it.

MR. MATTESON: You break it?

MR. NERI: I won't -- any breakage, I want to do it.

MR. MATTESON: Okay. And so it comes to you as a -- as a square block?

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: So there's a lot that you take out?

MR. NERI: Oh, yeah. I mean, big -- this big lump I buy, I'm the guy who draws the lines of how to cut up the stone, how I want, you know, what I want to use there and all of that.

MR. MATTESON: I noticed -- I think it's in the studio adjacent to us here. You have a -- it's not marble. It's plaster, I think, where there seems to be a line of poetry on it, written on it.

MR. NERI: That's a thing that Mary Julia and I are --

MS. KLIMENKO: We're going to --

MR. NERI: I was talking to Mary Julia about, and we started -- that's an old piece of sculpture that, you know, was never finished. And I started talking to her about where -- "Hey, how about where your poetry is literally -- you know, you -- you know, worked into the surface of the sculpture?"

And then we started writing lines of poetry on the piece, you know, and then she started chopping into it. And you chopped the face off.

MS. KLIMENKO: It was -- I said, "Since you're not using this sculpture, it isn't going anywhere. Why don't I -- why

don't we do collaboration in the round?"

And that's when we --

MR. NERI: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. KLIMENKO: And then we decided -- and then I chopped the face off because it was one of those ugly, big lip things, and so I just -- and then I think he got sort of deeply disturbed by this notion that I actually could take an axe, and so we set it aside. We set it aside, and we -- but it's a project we do want to do where --

MR. NERI: I wanted to start new pieces where this word thing was really brought in and used in a strong way which would take an effect upon the form itself, you know.

MR. MATTESON: How are you going to do it technically because it --

MR. NERI: Good question. [They laugh.]

MR. MATTESON: Okay.

MR. NERI: You tell me at this point.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, I mean, I'm trying to imagine.

MS. KLIMENKO: In some way, if you're making a new sculpture or even if you add it -- I mean, you could add, take away. What I was saying is that -- we don't need to start with an armature because it's such tedious work to do the armature and the burlap and that.

MR. NERI: We need an armature.

MS. KLIMENKO: But we could -- you could -- if you could -- you could actually add and hack and -- if you had, like, just a phrase coming out at a certain place. I mean, if he added plaster and chopped and did -- you know, just did whatever, then -- then you might see here and there, like, two words which I think could -- you know, it could --

MR. MATTESON: So you'd have a fragmented word as well as a fragmented body.

MS. KLIMENKO: Right, you'd have a -- exactly --

MR. NERI: Yes.

MS. KLIMENKO: -- and you'd have that where you're not -- it's not so --

MR. NERI: No. It's something we're going to have to work out.

MS. KLIMENKO: Right, right.

MR. NERI: I mean, we have to start with a new piece where it -- you know, it -- and not kind of working with an old idea. You understand what I mean?

MS. KLIMENKO: I know, but it takes so long to wrap those damn things.

MR. NERI: Oh, God.

MS. KLIMENKO: Okay. But we do -- but we do have that -- we are going to do that, but we don't want to have a -- just a piece where it looks like it's a -- like it's a billboard for a sculpture.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah, and not a collage feel at all.

MS. KLIMENKO: You're right.

MR. MATTESON: You want it much more organic.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MS. KLIMENKO: Yes.

MR. NERI: That's what I see.

MS. KLIMENKO: Yes. That's why we have to think about it and work on it together --

MR. NERI: Yes, yes.

MR. MATTESON: Well, it's exciting.

MR. NERI: I'm looking forward to it.

MS. KLIMENKO: Yeah. Well, we've always -- everything that we've done has been exciting. All the things that are on the walls in there, I wrote and left the quotes by -- the quote by Whitman somewhere -- "Somewhere surely I have lived a life of joy with you."

And I just -- Mariana Alcoforado is the nun, the seventeenth century nun that the three Marias based their persona -- I don't know if you've read the book or heard of the book *Three Marias* [Maria Isabel Barreno. Doubleday, 1975]. Three Portuguese women decided to take on a nun who had an affair with a soldier who then left her, and what they decided to do was not identify -- not identify each one, which one wrote what and just put it together in a book. And so they did that. Each woman wrote. They wrote different pieces. They put it together in a book. No -- there's no identification of which one of them -- their names were each Maria, and they were friends. And they were put in jail in Portugal for that book. It was -- it was considered --

MR. NERI: Lesbianism.

MS. KLIMENKO: Huh?

MR. NERI: Lesbianism.

MS. KLIMENKO: I --

MR. NERI: Anti-guy.

MS. KLIMENKO: There's no lesbian stuff. It was more -- it was pornographic. It was too -- it was considered too pornographic because their book -- all their writings are to this man or this -- and -- but it's one of our favorite books. And so Mariana Alcoforado which is on the wall is the nun.

MR. NERI: Before that I did the whole series of sculptures, the three female figures, you know, working together.

MR. MATTESON: Were those -- I mean, you quite obviously restrict yourself to the single figure primarily, but how many of these have you done more than one figure, a group of figures? It's not often, is it?

MR. NERI: Not often at all, no.

MR. MATTESON: And why is that?

MR. NERI: It's -- you know, I wanted to be where the action between these two figures. I wanted the action within that figure, what's taking place within that figure, what that figure -- the positioning of that figure and what it's saying.

MR. MATTESON: And not -- it's not relationships between figures you're interested in?

MR. NERI: No, except for those three Marias.

MR. MATTESON: And that -- the book is after -- I mean, those were inspired by this book?

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: They were. Are there any other books that -- besides poetry that are -- any other books that have -- have tickled your imagination?

MR. NERI: Probably so, you know.

MR. MATTESON: Do you have good -- favorite authors that you --

MR. NERI: Well, we've been talking about, you know --

MS. KLIMENKO: Mostly -- mostly --

MR. MATTESON: It's mainly poetry.

MR. NERI: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. KLIMENKO: Yeah, yeah.

MR. MATTESON: Travel books, that doesn't interest you so much?

MR. NERI: No. Instead of reading travel books, I go and travel.

MR. MATTESON: And travel, right. I mean, the reason I asked is when I talked to Roy De Forest, he was fascinated by travel books, and, you know, his pictures are often about trips.

MR. NERI: He traveled a lot, too.

MR. MATTESON: He did, too, but not as much as you, I don't think.

Now that you think about it, now in retrospect, how do you see yourself first as -- you've answered it pretty clearly about how you feel about your Latinoity, I suppose you might call it, your being a Hispanic which does not really figure in but has never left you.

MR. NERI: It's -- you know, it's part of me.

MR. MATTESON: But how does your -- your sense of yourself as an artist in history from the Bay Area, how do you see yourself in what the Bay Area has created, this Bay Area history of art, in a sense?

MR. NERI: The Bay Area, listen, San Francisco to start with in the '50s was an unbelievable place. I don't know if you were here in the '50s.

MR. MATTESON: Fifty-five was when I moved here.

MR. NERI: Okay. You saw it then. I mean, the people who were here, the people who were coming here, the -- you know. For Europeans, this was the end of the world, practically.

MR. MATTESON: But they thought -- a lot of Europeans liked San Francisco.

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: They can see it as, like, almost a continuation of Europe.

MR. NERI: And -- and, you know, sort of everything was happening here in San Francisco. That was unbelievable, and I got to see it. I got to hear it. I got to do it.

MR. MATTESON: You're one of the few sculptors, I mean, all that remained in that figurative tradition. I mean, there were people like Bob Hudson and other that were sort of non-objective, surrealist influenced, but you really -- it seems to me that you've sort of stayed in that Western European canon of figurative art in a very steadfast manner except --

MR. NERI: I certainly hope so.

MR. MATTESON: Except for those -- those minimal period of the early '60s that you --

MR. NERI: Well, you know, you've got to remember that, you know, my early painting was all abstract expressionist background --

MR. MATTESON: Right, right.

MR. NERI: -- roots. That's part of me.

MS. KLIMENKO: But also at that time, Manuel, you weren't -- even though you had friends who were artists, you weren't interested in what they were doing in particular. You worked every single day, every single night, and your work wasn't selling. We sent -- you sent that sculpture off to that convent in Palo Alto [CA], and you couldn't -- I swore the postman just turned back around with it or something. And so it was like -- it was like because nobody really cared, he could -- he just -- you just worked. It didn't matter to you what other people were doing.

MR. NERI: It wasn't an -- you know, it wasn't a big deal not to sell good, and it didn't hurt you if you didn't sell.

MS. KLIMENKO: And so you could stay with the figure because that -- you were drawn to that and it didn't matter what Bob Hudson was doing or what -- even though you might have dinner with him, I never heard you talk about art. In all these many years, I've never heard any of you talk about art at a party.

MR. NERI: We just did it.

MS. KLIMENKO: You just -- right, you talked about other stuff.

MR. MATTESON: And you said somewhere that you found that to be sort of liberating --

MR. NERI: Yes.

MR. MATTESON: -- that this wasn't -- there wasn't this self-conscious art community that just talked about theory.

MR. NERI: No.

MS. KLIMENKO: Right.

MR. NERI: Here was -- like, let's say going back to the Six Gallery period where I met everybody who was writing great poetry. Did I ever talk with them? Did I ever felt I had to talk to -- no. They -- I expected them to be writing great stuff. I would read it, but I wasn't about to, like, chase around after them and ask -- you know, talk to them about it. It was just part of the world I was in.

MR. MATTESON: Do you think that -- does your work sell in the East, in Asia? Does it go back there?

MR. NERI: I've had shows in Japan, and I've sold a few things. But, no, it's not my market. I wouldn't call it one of my markets, no.

MR. MATTESON: How about Europe? Is it --

MR. NERI: Not necessarily. I had a gallery in Paris for a while and never really sold much, and I had a gallery in Milan, never really sold much.

MR. MATTESON: Do you think it's because this prejudice they had against plaster?

MR. NERI: No, no, no. Probably also part of it, yes. But in Europe, there was something I felt very uncomfortable with, the art world there, the galleries. The galleries wanted to own you body and soul, and I felt very uncomfortable with that.

MR. MATTESON: In what way did you -- did they make that clear?

MR. NERI: Well, you know, first thing that my gallery in Milan said, "Well, Manuel, you're going to have to get exhibitions for -- for my artists in this gallery in America."

I said, "Well, that's not the way it's done in America." And they didn't like that very much.

MR. MATTESON: So, huh. The -- I guess -- I guess we can end this. Is there something you would like to say that you haven't said? I think we've covered a lot.

MR. NERI: We have covered a lot, and it's always a surprise opening the door up again --

MR. MATTESON: Yes. Is it?

MR. NERI: -- during conversations like this.

MR. MATTESON: Yes. Do you see yourself -- I heard someone not say this about you but say it about himself, that he felt -- he couldn't imagine not feeling or not being part of a tradition. Do you have that sense?

MR. NERI: When I look back, I realize we were the tradition, not just part of it. Everybody I knew was so involved in it, you know. We -- we did it. And, you know, it's not something I miss necessarily, but it was a grand thing. I used to look back, and it was a grand thing that happened. Thank God I was young and was able to get involved, you know, but --

MR. MATTESON: And that Davis was a continuation of that.

MR. NERI: Yes, very much so.

MR. MATTESON: Yeah. Now, what do you think of the current art scene? I mean, as much as you are aware of that? Are you aware of it very much?

MR. NERI: Well, I am not. I've completely stepped away from -- from teaching, of course, and I'm not crazy of

what I see in the galleries nowadays. And a lot of the museums are not really into bringing out what -- what's happening in the younger, beginning art world here in the Bay Area. They're not taking on the responsibility of presenting these ideas that are around us and starting to grow which is so important.

MR. MATTESON: Are you -- does any particular kind of art offend you as -- as a -- unattractive to you in a worse way?

MR. NERI: Well, some of the phases that what is called conceptual art is taking, it's just corny. I find it corny and silly.

MR. MATTESON: And been done before.

MR. NERI: Yeah. Well, not just done before but like that's art, you know. It -- and, you know, there are these things that are being presented by the big museum names, you know, as what's important, you know, today, and I don't see it very important. Maybe I'm just an old codger and come -- I certainly come from a different world by now, you know, but --

MR. MATTESON: Can you -- are there any new artists that you particularly like?

MR. NERI: God, I would have to think about that. I don't -- you know, I'm complaining about not -- the museums not reaching out to show us what's happening, but I feel it's their responsibility, still should be their responsibility of dealing into that. I don't know what's happening. So maybe that's why I'm asking the questions.

MR. MATTESON: Well, I want to thank you for your --

MR. NERI: Well, I guess I harangued you enough.

MR. MATTESON: And thank you, Mary Julia, very much.

MS. KLIMENKO: It was nice meeting you.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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