



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Richard T.  
McLean, 2009 Sept. 20

Funding for this interview was provided by the Terra Foundation for American  
Art.

**Contact Information**

Reference Department  
Archives of American Art  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D.C. 20560  
[www.aaa.si.edu/askus](http://www.aaa.si.edu/askus)

# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a digitally recorded interview with Richard McLean on September 20, 2009. The interview took place at the artist's home in Castro Valley, California, and was conducted by Jason Stieber for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Funding for this interview was provided by a grant from the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Richard McLean and Jason Stieber have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

JASON STIEBER: This is Jason Stieber, interviewing Richard McLean at the artist's home in Castro Valley, California, on September 20, 2009, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. And this is [memory] card number one.

Thank you for agreeing to sit for this. It's really a pleasure.

Let's start with your early childhood, starting with when and where you were born.

RICHARD T. MCLEAN: Well, I was born in Hoquiam, Washington.

MR. STIEBER: Could you spell that?

MR. MCLEAN: Yes. H-O-Q-U-I-A-M, just a stone's throw from Aberdeen. Well, not to drop a name, but Robert Motherwell was born in Aberdeen. [Laughs.] So, a source of culture there. I've never been – when I was just an infant, I was moved to Kelso, Washington, which is in from the coast. I think Hoquiam is on Grays Harbor. We moved inward to the Cowlitz River, a town called Kelso. And I was – I think it was there that I was given over to the foster parents, who – because my parents ran a hotel in Kelso, but my mother wanted somebody to watch my brother and I. He's a year and a half younger. And –

MR. STIEBER: What are your parents' names?

MR. MCLEAN: My biological parents are Alfred McLean. And my mother's name was Dorothy – Dorothy Thorpe. When she was married, of course, she became Dorothy McLean. And during the late '30s, '36-'37, going up to '40 – it was about two and a half years – my dad and mother worked for Pan American Airways, Juan Trippe's airline. And he was opening – they just opened the route over the Pacific, the transpacific route to Honk Kong –

MR. STIEBER: These were your biological parents?

MR. MCLEAN: – and Philippines. Yes, these were biological parents. So I kind of always knew them, sort of at a distance. I'll refer to them as – my dad's name – was known by his associates as Mac, from McLean. They were always Daddy Mac and Momma Dorothy to me. And so we were raised by foster parents, Al and Euna [sp] Richards.

MR. STIEBER: And what's your brother's name?

MR. MCLEAN: My brother's name is Bruce.

MR. STIEBER: So your biological parents ran a hotel before they were –

MR. MCLEAN: They managed the Pan Am hotels on Midway and Guam [U.S. Territories] –

MR. STIEBER: – oh, I see.

MR. MCLEAN: – in the Pacific, during the late '30s. And they came back to the States by, I think, about 1940. It was close to three years. Then he took a job – he was trained in the food services industry. He worked in a number of hotels in New York City. My mother was born in England, in London, Twickenham actually, and moved over with her family to Rochester when she was about nine years old.

MR. STIEBER: Rochester, New York?

MR. MCLEAN: Yes, New York. My dad, Alfred, came from an Irish – Scots-Irish stock, through Prince Edward Island. And so they were basically East Coast-oriented people until, sometime in the '30s, they moved out to

[the] West Coast. And eventually most of the family went out to [the] West Coast to settle mainly in the Northwest, Seattle area.

Anyway, I'm trying to make this brief because I used to recount this story, and people would ask me, well, how did you get started? And I'd get into these digressions about the family and would hold people for hours. But I sort of had my feet in two camps. I knew that I was a McLean and that my parents, biological parents, were city people. I was raised, however, by foster parents who were country people. They grew up on ranches in South Dakota and Idaho, so not particularly worldly, such as my parents.

And - but that formed the basis, in my mind, I remember, from as far back as I can remember, even though I had no particular, no intimate relationship or ongoing relationship with my biological parents, I was really emotionally tied to my foster parents because they were - they did the everyday, daily chores of raising me. So we'd see my parents, my biological parents, from time to time, when they'd blow into town, or we'd go up to - they were running a hotel called the Crown Willamette Inn in Washington, just north of Vancouver, a little way up the river. It was a paper mill town, and he managed that hotel there.

He was always running a hotel. It seemed like - I don't know. The guy never seemed to be able to hold a job for very long. [Laughs.] Whether it was his fault or not - and I have letters in my file where he's gotten into some arguments with his superiors back in Alameda [CA], when he was out in the Pacific running the hotel, complaining about the food deliveries and whatnot there on the island - which came from the States by ship.

And so I think, for whatever reasons, he might have been considered somewhat of a difficult guy by the airline. And he probably was - his contract ran out, and they just didn't renew the contract, even though my parents would have liked to have gotten back. But by that time the war had started, and that was lost to them.

MR. STIEBER: Where did your biological parents live while you and your brother were in the care of the Richards?

MR. MCLEAN: Well, they lived - as I said, they were running a hotel in Kelso [WA]. We were in the south part of town, and they were up in the north part of town -

MR. STIEBER: I see.

MR. MCLEAN: - at one time. And then I've got a list of - which, in his job résumé - of the various hotels that he operated - he managed - and coffee shops, restaurants, whatnot. He was managing the Totem Café on Pike Street in Seattle when he died in 1952, at the age of 55. It was a coronary thrombosis or something like that, blood circulation problem. And which is where I've inherited my heart problems.

MR. STIEBER: Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.

MR. MCLEAN: To the extent that I've inherited it. But I've helped those things along. I'm diabetic and also have a bypass. I got a lot of things that I have to contend with. But on my mother's side, the diabetes issue was in that family.

Anyway -

MR. STIEBER: What did - tell me a little bit about your foster parents.

MR. MCLEAN: My foster parents. My foster father was raised on a ranch in Wyoming and then moved from there to another ranch in South Dakota, in the Black Hills there. And they would break horses and herd cattle and do all that stuff. That was back in the early part of the 20th century. So he went from that to getting married, and moved to Kelso. He went to work for Weyerhaeuser Lumber Company. There were two big plants: Weyerhaeuser and Long-Bell [Lumber Company]. But he worked for Weyerhaeuser in the woods and up kind of in the overreaches of the Olympia Peninsula forest.

MR. STIEBER: Was it a logging -

MR. MCLEAN: It was a logging operation, but he was in charge of a pile driver crew that built - timbered trestles - railroad trestles across gulleys and canyons to carry the timber out to the main collection point. So he would be gone for a week, come home, and, of course, his lunches were made at the - what do you call it - the mess hall, or the camp kitchen.

And I remember, my brother and I used to wait with great anticipation and see what he would bring, because he'd always leave something leftover from lunch, cookies or a piece of cake or something like that, a sandwich. That was our little treat when he'd come home. We'd filch his lunch pail to see what was left. [Laughs.]

MR. STIEBER: Did they have -

MR. MCLEAN: But he was a rough-and-tumble guy. I remember he drank a little too much, uneducated, basically. He might have gone through to the eighth grade in a country school, one of those typical hardscrabble kinds of existence where you had to ride at least eight miles to school on horseback. In summertime you were fighting off rattlesnakes with a knotted rope just so your horse could get through. I don't know -

His bigger and older brothers used to take the horse away from him after he broke it. He was the smallest of the three brothers, I believe. And being of a simple mind, as he was, he would tend to take the side of the little guy without asking any questions. I was a little bigger than my younger brother. So if something would happen, and Al Richards didn't witness what it was, he would assume that my wailing sibling was in the right and I was in the wrong. I was the bully. I think he got that from the way he was raised with his brothers and sisters. They were - he'd have to go out and break another horse. And his philosophy was, you hit first and ask questions later.

I would always get smacked around, getting the razor strap he used on me or whatever, take me into the bathroom and laying into me.

MR. STIEBER: They didn't have any children of their own?

MR. MCLEAN: They didn't have any children of their own, and I think my foster mother was unable to have children. And - but she loved kids and took in my brother and I, plus shortly afterwards, three other children, from the same mother, from another family.

MR. STIEBER: How old were you when you and your brother went to -

MR. MCLEAN: I was taken in by foster parents at the age of - I think it was 18 months, 18 months, and then my younger brother was taken in immediately. I believe that's how it went. It was a - there was always a bit of contention there because, as I say, sort of a town-and-gown conflicted situation. You had the country folks and the city folks.

My [biological] dad, because he didn't seem to be able to hold a job, and my mother was always lamenting that - she always wanted a house with a little white picket fence, a permanent home where she could raise her children. And my father, purportedly, wanted the same thing. Basically, he missed being away from his boys, the three of us boys. They raised the third brother, or the oldest brother, themselves.

MR. STIEBER: What's that brother's name?

MR. MCLEAN: His name was Scott McLean, Scotty, a struggling jazz musician, drummer, grew up in the '40s and died about two or three years ago at a nursing home in San Leandro. But he was always - he was an incorrigible kid. He couldn't get along in the army. He couldn't get along with his parents. He couldn't get along with women or club owners. He had a hard time getting along with me. But he became a club owner. He tried to tell him how to run the club.

MR. STIEBER: This is Scott.

MR. MCLEAN: Yes, Scott. And a hard guy to like, really. He didn't have any friends, didn't have any girlfriends. [Inaudible, background noise.]

So he was a kind of focal point for my foster parents, because they were much - very much believers in discipline. My biological parents couldn't handle kids at all. Neither one of them were really prepared to be parents, but they had three boys anyway. And he was -

MR. STIEBER: Your father.

MR. MCLEAN: - yes, my father, my biological father, was an autodidact. He had some formal business schooling back east. He also served in the Canadian army, I think along with his brother, in the First World War. But he was very much a well-read man and a kind of would-be intellectual, if not an actual one. I remember him trying to discuss [Arthur] Schopenhauer with truck drivers over the counter in the café he managed later on in Idaho.

But I saw him fall on hard times when he actually came up to Idaho, where my foster parents and we were living on a farm there, raising grains and dairy cattle. And he spent the summer there. And he was out on a hay wagon, arranging the hay and trying to do - which he probably hadn't done - if he'd ever done that at all - probably had done this as a youth - and fell off the wagon. The horses started forward to the next several shocks of hay. And he wasn't prepared, so he just tumbled off. And so he wound up in bed in the farmhouse. And then he went back to California, I believe, later in the summer. He then went into partnership with my foster parents on a joint café and general store, in a little town of about 500 people called New Meadows.

MR. STIEBER: In California?

MR. MCLEAN: In Idaho.

MR. STIEBER: In Idaho.

MR. MCLEAN: Yes. As I said, I was raised in Kelso for about – till I was about nine years old. In 1944, we moved to Idaho. My foster mother had joined the WACs [Women's Army Corps], and she was stationed outside Boise [ID]. So we wound up there, and my foster dad rejoined her. She was a practical nurse before that and worked at the general hospital in Kelso.

So she – whenever the kids would come down with a cold or we'd have measles or some malady, she knew essentially what to do about it. So she was a good caretaker that way. And –

MR. STIEBER: So the relationship between your foster – they went into this – I want to go back to this –

MR. MCLEAN: – yes, they went –

MR. STIEBER: – the relationship was good between your foster parents and your biological parents?

MR. MCLEAN: Well, it was good. I think it was around 1947, and it lasted till about 1950. They were there about three years. My dad ran the restaurant because it was his thing, restaurants, coffee shops. He had, by that time, in 1946, got a divorce from my mother. Her idea. My mother married another guy living in Reno [NV].

My dad married, I believe, a cocktail waitress, half his age, on the hotel staff, that he was managing at the time – [laughs] – which I think was the Wolf Hotel [Hotel Wolf] in Stockton [CA]. Crazy. He managed hotels in Oroville [CA], Stockton, two places that were considered out-of-the-way venues. So he was kind of down on his luck at that time, at a low ebb. So he brought his new wife, younger than my mother, of course, and her son from a –

MR. STIEBER: What was her name?

MR. MCLEAN: Her name was Evelyn. And she had a son from a previous marriage.

So my father – in his early 50s – fathered another child by Evelyn, who is my half sister, whom I have never [seen] since she was an infant in swaddling clothes, and never made any effort, on either my part or her part, to get in touch with one another. So she's out there somewhere. When you get families mixed up like that, it just complicates things infinitely.

MR. STIEBER: So you've got a lot of siblings from various sources and circumstances.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, half siblings, foster siblings.

MR. STIEBER: What is your half sister's name?

MR. MCLEAN: Colleen.

MR. STIEBER: So tell me a little bit about your early education. You have a lot of influences there, your foster parents and your biological parents. Were any of them interested in art, or did any of them show any artistic abilities?

MR. MCLEAN: Yes. Let me tie off this one point here first, and then I'll get into that: the encouragement I got from my foster parents. When we were living in New Meadows and my dad and his wife were operating a café next door to my foster parents, who ran the store, something came out. Evidently my dad, in a letter that I have that he'd written – he had written this letter to his former wife, my mother, and made this heartrending complaint, because he'd evidently talked to either Bruce or to me. I can't remember having the conversation, but he got some truth out of us that he wasn't aware of.

And the main thing was that – I think because my foster mother – my foster dad wasn't involved in this sort of thing. He just, sort of, worked, and came and went. But my foster mother, I know, never missed an opportunity to let Bruce and I know that our father was a kind of weak man, a weak person, and that my mother, my biological mother, was kind of 1920s flapper that never grew up. And that they basically lacked the necessary qualities to be good, responsible parents.

And so we kind of grew up with this kind of negative propaganda being thrown at us from time to time. And I think it was because she feared losing us back to our parents someday, because in those days there wasn't – the legalities of parenthood weren't as prominent. And she had no legal hold over us at all. We were just – she described it one time: your mother came down with a friend and dropped us off there at the Richards's just to

have us babysat and never came to pick us up. That's kind of – we just lived our lives out that way.

I remember in '46, when my parents divorced, my foster mother asked my brother and I, would you want to be legally adopted and have the name – have the Richards name, or just stay as you are, McLeans? And I thought, gee, Richard Richards – [laughs] – didn't sound as good. Richard McLean sounds better. So I said, I don't know. Let's just keep it the way it is. So we opted for not getting adopted. However, they went ahead and adopted the other three kids that they had also been raising.

But she always lived in fear, I think, that someday there may be a knock at the door, a phone call, or something, and they may be saying, look, Mac's got a great job. We just bought this house. And now we want to bring the family all together again. And at any time, they could have claimed us, until age of 18.

MR. STIEBER: Right.

MR. MCLEAN: So I think it was her way of somehow building some insurance for herself there.

Well, anyway, my dad got wind of this. And he considered that the most horrendous betrayal of trust, that all this time, our foster parents had been alienating my brother and I from my parents. And so anyway, that ended the relationship there in New Meadows [ID], and he quit the restaurant, and took his wife and new daughter and went to Seattle to manage the Totem Café there in Seattle. And that's where he died a couple of years later.

I just happen to have visited him just a week or so before he died. My brother and I took a drive over there – [inaudible] – vacation.

So that's the way that ended and – but my foster mother – as early as I can recall, just as a little guy, I was always interested in the visual world, the way things looked. That was what reality was. That was what was important. And looking at old report cards and things from – I failed the second grade, put me a year behind in my schooling. So I was 19 when I graduated high school, instead of the customary 18. And I'll never forget that woman, a teacher –

MR. STIEBER: The teacher who failed you?

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, I was in love with her. At the age – I was in second grade, what, maybe seven, something like that – seven or eight – and I was just totally smitten with her. She was a young girl, out of college probably, walked around in these wooden clogs, I remember. Her name was Seresig, Miss Seresig. She taught school, and then on weekends or in the evenings or something, I remember, she worked at a local radio station. In those days, no TV, it was all radio. And she was a sound effects person at the studio. So, "As Norah ran hastily down the gravel road to meet - "

MR. STIEBER: And then somebody running down the gravel road.

MR. MCLEAN: – she stood in this little box with gravel on it and sort of jumped up and down, running, feet to the ground, and hit tin pans and shake whatever it is to make thunder, all that stuff. She was into that.

Anyway, I was always being favorably commented on for my habit of illustrating my papers, spelling tests, or whatever it was – what did I do last summer, whatever assignment it was. It was the Wallace Grade School, named after Henry Wallace, the labor leader. And I would illustrate these things, or I would get a complaint from a teacher to my foster mother saying, Richard is very bright, very talented, blah, blah, blah; he's a good student, except he has a hard time – he's always looking out of the window. He's always not paying attention to his school work.

So my attention was focused elsewhere, usually on the visual things, a bird flying around outside on a tree or something, not listening to what the teacher was saying. So I got a lot of complaints about that. And so I was always drawing, or on rainy days, I remember, particularly in Kelso or in the Northwest, where it rains an awful lot, making clay figures – they call it plasticine clay – clay figures of superheroes and whatnot – Captain Marvel, the Green Lantern, and all of these various set of superheroes. And I also remember doing a little house, wouldn't be bigger than that, maybe, peak of the roof to –

MR. STIEBER: A couple of inches.

MR. MCLEAN: And I hollowed out the inside enough to insert a little table with four legs. Of course, I couldn't do it now, fingers too big. And that table had a top on it and a door on clay hinges. It would open. And on top of the table was a vase of flowers. And my aunt – one of my aunts supposedly still has that, along with a few other clay figures and things in a shoebox she keeps on her refrigerator for 60 years, 70 years. Yeah.

So I was always drawing or modeling something all the time. Got in trouble for it in fourth grade, doing some quasi-pornography and then some of the same kind of drawing for a while – I got caught doing that – a very

religious girl in the classroom tipped the teacher off, and I was hauled in from recess. And the things were laid out in front of me like a deck of cards, because I did a sequence. I'd do a drawing, and I show it, and then they said, yes, yes, we want another one. So I made another drawing upon the World War II graffiti figure called Kilroy, "Kilroy was here."

MR. STIEBER: Right, right.

MR. MCLEAN: It was painted on the tanks, on the sides of buildings in Europe. And this figure, with a nose hanging over the top of a wall and bug-eyed, kind of a voyeuristic sort of thing. And he abducts this pretty young thing, takes her out to the country to a secluded barn, and ends rapturously. [Laughs.] A little mouse at the corner, a little question mark above his head, I remember. I never showed anything, didn't draw anything explicit. It was all innuendo, a couple of feet out beyond the edge of the haystack kind of thing. But the teacher, an ex-marine, laid them all out and threatened to tell my parents about it if I was caught doing that again.

So then in high school, later on, my high school professor [principal], he enjoyed some of the same drawings with the same flavor, based on Civil War figures. The high school, I think had 78 students in it, in New Meadows. And there was no music department. We always referred to the principal as Prof. His name was Harry Warr, and he -

MR. STIEBER: Could you spell the last name?

MR. MCLEAN: Harry Warr, W-A-R-R. Two Rs at the end. And he led the a cappella choir - we won quite a few number of accolades from our performances, made up of most of the high school. There were 40 students in the choir and 78 students in the whole high school. I think the ones that weren't in that choir were the football team.

MR. STIEBER: But that was the only music program in the high school.

MR. MCLEAN: It was the only music program in the high school. So - and there was no art department, no art classes whatsoever. So I wound up - and I still have copies of the books - I wound up, for about two years, illustrating the yearbook.

And I also led the pep band. I played trumpet. And we sold the café that we started out in partnership with my dad, and bought a café across the street called the Pine Knot Café. And I went on through high school there at that establishment and worked diligently for my foster mother - no pay, of course. She did the cooking; she did the night shift - her and I ran the night shift, more or less. My foster father ran the morning shift. And at night, having had an older brother who was struggling in the jazz scene during the early '50s, late '40s, I was aware of certain jazz personalities. And we had a nickelodeon, a Wurlitzer, in the restaurant. And of course, the guy that supplied the records supplied records that would appeal to the hillbilly taste of the locals there.

MR. STIEBER: I'm sorry, can I interrupt one second? Scott is your older brother?

MR. MCLEAN: Yes, he's my older brother.

MR. STIEBER: Was he the first one?

MR. MCLEAN: He was 5 years older than me.

MR. STIEBER: Yes, okay. So he was born first -

MR. MCLEAN: He was born first, and I was born second. And then Bruce.

MR. STIEBER: - I see, yes, okay.

MR. MCLEAN: Anyway, the guy that came to supply the records, he changed them every two weeks. And he also - it was legal to use slot machines in the state, too. So he would come and take the change out of the slot machines and juke box. We had a slot machine; we had punchboards and things that we'd use - gambling things, plus the nickelodeon. He would always put in there a Henry Busse record or a Louis Armstrong or a Phil Napoleon - some kind of a jazz thing, two or three records. He knew he'd lose money on them, and I knew how to reach behind the nickelodeon and trip the thing so I could play it over and over and over again for free.

So after the shift was over at night, I would get my trumpet out, and I would jam alone with the records. And so I learned to play by ear. I don't read music.

MR. STIEBER: And you had no instructor for trumpet. You were -

MR. MCLEAN: No instructor. No, I never had any lessons. My mother bought me a trumpet, my foster mother,

and that's the one I used all through high school. I have a recording here, as a matter of fact, in the library, of a trumpet solo - [inaudible] - classical, one that I pounded into myself by just sheer repetition. And Harry Warr accompanied me on the piano. He was the piano player. He would also play popular songs, and he could read music, too, of course, since he minored in music when he majored in education at the College of Idaho [Caldwell, ID].

So I got to where I was playing for dances on Saturday nights, and we'd go out of town, in the surrounding communities and play - usually have a trio - myself on trumpet, a piano, and drums, or maybe a bass if we couldn't get a drummer. And I played, and I indulged my fantasies.

MR. STIEBER: Did you want to be a jazz musician?

MR. MCLEAN: It was a struggle. By the time I graduated high school, I was really torn between either going into music, being a jazz musician, or being an artist, because I was good at both things. I could do both things. And fortunately, I made the right choice. So - yes, basically, that's about it for the music thing.

But this thing about - I also have in my library a book that my foster mother had from the Book-of-the-Month Club. I think she got that back in the '30s. And it's a classic biography of Leonardo da Vinci. And I've kept that thing around. And she - she didn't know anything about art. She wasn't educated either. She went through high school. She had more education than the man she married, but she didn't know anything about art. But she knew talent when she saw it, as the saying goes. And she always deferred to me, to my drawing moods and whatever - [inaudible] - and so I got encouragement from her.

My foster father basically would take to boasting, to my embarrassment, you know, "He can draw" - but my foster mother was much cooler about that. She just provided for me. She provided clay, pencils, crayons, whatever I wanted. And even in high school, when I had chores to do around the restaurant, the café, my other foster siblings would wind up having to do the work if I was into a drawing situation in my little room at the back of the restaurant.

MR. STIEBER: Right.

MR. MCLEAN: So it wasn't too long before I realized that any kind of kudos that I got or any kind of approval from society, or from anybody, basically, came from the fact that I could do something that somebody else couldn't do, at least nobody in the family. And I think that's why I chose the life I chose, because I think that most - and it's interesting. If you listen to comedians who were faced with the same question many times, why did you become a comedian, why did you - how did you get started, almost all of them tell you that being the class clown was the thing that drove them, that they couldn't get attention playing football or doing any work. But they could make people laugh.

You wind up doing in life basically - you don't just sort of choose down a menu, oh, let's see, doctor, lawyer, Indian chief. What do I want to be? You just - you gravitate toward what it is that you - that validates you in the eyes of other people.

MR. STIEBER: Right, absolutely.

MR. MCLEAN: So that's essentially why I wound up going from high school to my first formal art classes in junior college.

MR. STIEBER: And which junior college did you attend?

MR. MCLEAN: That was Boise Junior College in Boise [ID]; it meant leaving New Meadows for good and moving down there. And my brother and I both started college - my younger brother because, as I said, having failed the second grade, he caught up with me. He was a year and a half younger than I was, but we both were in the same graduating class.

So we started college in the fall of '53. And I spent the summer working for the [U.S.] Forest Service, fought forest fires and that kind of stuff and did patrol work and lookout tower work and stuff like that. And in wintertime, when I was in Boise going to college and in town, I worked for an exclusive women's clothing store as a shipping clerk. Actually, I took over the job of another guy who was an artist, who worked for Carroll Sellers.

MR. STIEBER: That was the name of the store?

MR. MCLEAN: They called it Carroll's, yes. And he was - well, I don't - [inaudible] - his personality, but he was quite a kind of an imperious, controller type of guy, but -

MR. STIEBER: Do you remember his name?



MR. MCLEAN: Well, his name was Carroll Sellers.

MR. STIEBER: Oh, his name. Oh, Carroll was the name that he had.

MR. MCLEAN: And he was the boss. He was the father. He had a couple of sons, I think, and his wife also worked in the store, too. It was a place – they bought – oh, geez, I – I mean, most of the names you heard in women's fashion, they handled in their store. And they'd go on buying trips to New York every year. So that was the place to go, in Boise in those days, to buy high-fashion women's clothes. And as they bought them and wanted them shipped out to various places, I'd box them out and ship them out.

So – and then I worked for the Forest Service up in the Boise National Forest during the summers when school was out. But anyway, I did two years of junior college there. Then – and that's where I met Darlene. We were both in the band together. She was playing clarinet and I was playing trumpet. And I –

MR. STIEBER: Was it a school band or –

MR. MCLEAN: It was a college band. And I also got scholarships, not because of my playing ability, but it was a kind of a bribe to keep me in the band, because they were short on trumpets. [Laughs.] So even being a trumpet player had some cachet there, and it was worth some money to them. So we got married at the end of my graduating junior college, in '55, and moved to California, and I've been here ever since.

MR. STIEBER: What prompted that move?

MR. MCLEAN: Actually, well, I thought – I was torn between going to the Art Institute in Chicago [IL] or going to California. I didn't know of any colleges in California, necessarily, but I had an uncle and his wife who were living down in Palo Alto. So at least there would be somebody else, like, [in] the state that I could kind of tie into. But there was a kid from BJC who graduated a couple of years before I did, Don Jevons, also an art student the residing in the Bay Area.

MR. STIEBER: From the junior college?

MR. MCLEAN: Yes, from the junior college. And he went to College of Arts and Crafts – California College of Arts and Crafts, as it was called in those days [now California College of the Arts, San Francisco and Oakland] – and then came back to Boise Junior College for a visit. And I remember him talking to those of us in the art department about this great school he was going to and what it was like to be getting an education at that particular institution. And I thought, well, gee, that's closer than Chicago is. And I got an uncle down there. And it's in driving distance. So we bought a '50 Plymouth sedan and packed whatever we had and headed for California. And I had enrolled – went through the enrollment procedures –

MR. STIEBER: Before you get there, can you talk a little bit about the instruction you received in junior college? What sort of standards –

MR. MCLEAN: The head of the department there was, I think, a graduate from BYU [Brigham Young University, Provo] in Utah named Conan Mathews and he – he was very appreciative of my abilities, as well. I got the impression from him that he was – he counted me as one of his star students, I guess.

And I remember the Boise art gallery [Boise Art Museum] at that time. I remember seeing – I guess it was the first time I'd ever actually seen any modern art, and I keep wanting to say Salvador Dali. It was a Surrealist show. I'm sure it wasn't Dali's work, but it looked an awful lot like Dali. It was really – almost a dead ringer.

And before that time, I was a rock-ribbed, almost fascist defender of Norman Rockwell and of representational art, period. And I sort of took the line that was also making it around the political circuits in this country, that abstract art was really a kind of subversive way in which foreign influences were trying to undermine this country.

[END CARD 1.]

MR. STIEBER: This is Jason Stieber interviewing Richard McLean at the artist's home in Castro Valley, California, on September 20, 2009, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is memory card number two.

Okay, so you were telling us about – you were buying the whole line that abstract art was representative of foreign influence.

MR. MCLEAN: I have three female cousins on my biological family's side: my uncle, Larry, who always wanted boys and he got three girls; my dad, who always wanted girls, got three boys.

So anyway, the three girls that lived up in Oregon, and they, I think – well, at least a couple of them went to Marylhurst College [now Marylhurst University, Marylhurst, OR]. They are Catholic. And I remember one of them writing me – this was back in the early '50s, before I graduated high school – about what a wonderful experience they were having in the art classes there. They were being taught by a nun – of course, all teachers were nuns – about abstract art. And, boy, I sent a letter back to her cutting loose on abstract art.

And it was just a typical [Senator Joseph] McCarthy-esque rant, you know, about the evils of nonrepresentational painting. And, of course, I preferred Dixieland to bebop in those days, too.

MR. STIEBER: [Laughs] There is nothing better than bebop. I'm sorry. [Laughs.]

MR. MCLEAN: That is what all my records are. I mean, all my heroes are bebop players. I mean, you should go back to – what is his name – the trumpet player, very lyrical trumpet player, traditional jazz, swing, basically. Bobby Hackett. I mean, you just don't get better than Bobby Hackett, you know. And even my brother, Scott, who was into bebop, was praising Hackett in those days.

So, you know, I still like a lot of trad[itional] jazz players. But the golden era of American jazz was the '50s, basically. Bebop was where it was at.

MR. STIEBER: Charlie Parker.

MR. MCLEAN: Charlie Parker, Fats Navarro, I mean, you name it. You can go on and on, those guys. And Art Pepper, all those. I have got all of those CDs and everything. So that is where I turn off, in 1960, when the Beatles hit in '64. I mean, all popular music and popular culture just eludes me entirely.

MR. STIEBER: A lot of people who were into jazz at that time were also into abstract art, you know, abstraction [Abstract] Expressionists.

MR. MCLEAN: Oh, yeah.

MR. STIEBER: So how did the jazz music influence your artwork?

MR. MCLEAN: Well –

MR. STIEBER: Or did it? And maybe it didn't.

MR. MCLEAN: I think – I haven't given enough thought to know which came first or how they meshed. But I think I was still musically – especially in most of the '50s decade – with traditional jazz. That is where my taste was, even though I had embraced, or was embracing, about the same time, non-objective art.

Because when I came down to California – well, I remember in junior college I did some kind of – I remember thinking along the lines of Stan Kenton because – and Darlene had a Stan Kenton long-play record. And I did this thing, a city of glass or something. It was an abstract – looked like a stained-glass window kind of thing. So it was a little foray into the abstract. But that turned right around.

One year, I painted a Disney-esque kind of old moldering barn out in a field, you know, with moss on the roof and all this sort of thing. I actually sold it in town to a framing shop. But as I say – in junior college, I did see this Surrealist show at the Boise Art Gallery [sic], and other than seeing it and whatever subliminal effect it might have had on me, I am not aware that it was an epiphany at all to me. I just saw it, and I thought, oh, that is what modern art looks like, huh?

MR. STIEBER: It is an exhibition that sticks out in your memory?

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah.

MR. STIEBER: Which is the important point.

MR. MCLEAN: And, you know, I can't plead all that much ignorance, because my foster mother, again, through the Book-of-the-Month Club in the '30s, I remember, Masterpieces of American Art was a gold-embossed, circular motif impressed into, like, a blue linen book binding. And it was a coffee-table book. And it had Thomas Hart Benton; it had John Currie; it had [Winslow] Homer. It had all the – and [John] Sloan and the Ashcan School. I think it even had [Thomas] Eakins. I think it had Eakins in there, too, because I remember it was the first time I had ever seen – I grew up with that image of Max Schmitt in a Single Scull [The Champion Single Sculls, 1871], one of my favorite American paintings.

And I remember seeing those images. And so when I was just a kid in elementary school, I was seeing those images. I remember poring over those books. I remember there was some folk artist who – he was probably a

black artist, because there was this moonlit night, this farmhouse, and somebody had just died, or was dying, on the deathbed inside this lit - garishly lit room in this house.

And then outside, there was the devil, Lucifer, up there in a tree or something, and I think probably an opposing deity over here battling over the soul of the deceased, I assume. And I remember - because I never liked my foster father.

In fact, I was at a family reunion talking to some childhood cousins of mine who grew up in the same environment I did. And they said, oh, yeah, Al, boy, was he scary. [Inaudible] - says yeah. And none of them wanted - such a violent guy. But I always remembered this devil, the face on the devil. I said, it looks just like my foster dad.

But anyway, this book had a pretty good sampling of American painting from the 19th century and earlier 20th century - or at least up to 1940 or so. Plus there was Masterpieces of European Art, another big coffee table book about two inches thick. I still have it in the library. And it was about European art, Rembrandt and all the figures in European art history.

So I had these things that I was very sensitively conscious of. I mean, they weren't just things that were around taking up space in our living room. These were things that I would pore over, because there were pictures. They were very interesting pictures. And [Albert Pinkham] Ryder, he was in there, too. And gosh -

MR. STIEBER: Pinkham Ryder?

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, Pinkham Ryder. So I did get some pictorial exposure to what was happening in the art world so I had some sense of the world out there of activity that wasn't like what I was living in. And somehow I always associated, again, that - I think about my dad and my mom being city people. It always seemed to me - because I was always surrounded - even in high school and later on, too - I mean, I was surrounded by what Bill Maher described the other night as the "cracker world."

MR. MCLEAN: [Laughs] The shit kickers, you know, just hillbillies. And I had to listen to their music, making milkshakes for them and chicken-fried steaks and whatnot, you know?

MR. STIEBER: Was Boise a little bit of freedom from that? Or did you experience the same?

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, a little more freedom. I actually went to a concert and heard Rafael Mendez play the trumpet - a concert, a whole concert of his work there in person.

MR. STIEBER: Was there an artist community, did you know? Did you hang out with other artists that you went to school with or teachers?

MR. MCLEAN: In Boise?

MR. STIEBER: In Boise, yeah.

MR. MCLEAN: No, there was no community of artists, particularly not on my level. The students, nobody particularly hung out. And I was - I have always been pretty much a loner anyway, even later on at the College of Arts and Crafts. I wasn't - I mean, Manuel Neri, you know, he was a student there at the time I was there, too. But Manuel, he was plugged into a whole other level of social activity.

And I was married. When I got through with my coursework that day, I would sweep out the studios. I was doing a little work for the school for a few pennies to help out. Then I would go home, and my wife would get home from her job at the bank, and she would make supper. And we would sit down and eat and watch Walter Cronkite, you know. I mean, we sort of built our own little private domestic world.

We never really went out. I didn't hang out at bars or - I mean, the whole Cedar Bar scene in New York during the hey day of the New York School were guys that had knock-down-drag-out fights, either verbal or, in some cases, if [Jackson] Pollock was there, they would often turn physical. Break furniture up and stuff over - [inaudible] - issues. And hanging out in bars and hanging out with the guys, you know, it was just never my nature, never my nature. I've been married for what - since '55. It always seemed to me to be a struggle, which required the most dedicated teamwork to keep it going and to make something of yourself in this life.

And I just never - I would rather retire to a corner and read a good book. It is what I would do rather than hang out with the guys.

MR. STIEBER: So you left - you graduated from Boise Junior College in 1950 -

MR. MCLEAN: Fifty-five.

MR. STIEBER: Nineteen fifty-five.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, spring of '55. In June of '55, we got married and then went to California.

So I got down here. My wife immediately got a job, because we had no income, very little saved and all. And I had looked for work during summertimes, you know, to make money to pay tuition and whatnot. And she had gotten a job working for Bank of California, and wound up as supervisor of the addressograph department in the bank. They don't even do that kind of stuff anymore. It is all done on computers now. It was work. We were both working. And we hung out a lot with my uncle and his wife over in Palo Alto. We would go to the beach. And they showed us a lot of things in California. We went up to Fort Bragg and Mendocino, also down the coast to Santa Cruz and places like that.

So they were mainly our social life. And at school, I knew other people. I could recognize them. But I never associated with them after school, after the day's classes were over.

MR. STIEBER: Did you go to any exhibitions that stick out in your mind after you got to CCAC?

MR. MCLEAN: Well, perhaps the most important exhibition of my life, actually, was at CCAC. It was an absolute pivotal point in my way of thinking, because I - I mean, it was just - I mean, things were happening a mile a minute. I was seeing stuff that I had never seen before. I was listening to talk that I had never heard. People were thinking and doing things that I had no experience with up in Idaho.

I remember I had an early painting class from [Richard] Diebenkorn. And I remember working on this painting during the summertime so I would have something to show the teachers when fall classes began. And I remember it was some kind of a shipboard fighting scene on a freighter or something. There were some guys duking it out on the deck of the ship. This is something that N. C. Wyeth would have done. And I did this thing.

And, yeah, it reminds me. The only instruction I ever took - and I never really finished it - was when I answered one of those ads on the back of a matchbook cover.

MR. STIEBER: When was this?

MR. MCLEAN: This was back around 1949 to '50. And it was Art Instruction Incorporated, Minneapolis [MN].

MR. STIEBER: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCLEAN: You know, the "Draw me" thing.

MR. STIEBER: Right.

MR. MCLEAN: And you had to copy the drawing. And if it looked good enough, they would send you - what they did, they never sent you a course. They would give you an opportunity to buy the course. So we bought the course, and I never finished it. But I sent in a few lessons anyway and got back with tracing sheets over the drawing that I did and outlines showing where I was a little off here and a little off there. So that is the only instruction - formal instruction - I ever got before I went to [B]C.

Anyway, I took this painting, the shipyard brawl, in to show Diebenkorn. And it was on a piece of canvas board that you would buy at the local supply shop on campus. And he was so put off by it. He said, look, why don't you - because I didn't have a canvas stretched up or anything, you know. He said, well, why don't you just turn it over and paint on the cardboard backing?

I was shocked. It was a little bit of a struggle getting started. But I caught on fast, because it was all around me. I mean, it was - all these other people seemed to be steeped in the right groove, you know. And a lot of them growing up in California had gone to Saturday classes in museums and whatnot, and they had much more experience than I had.

MR. STIEBER: What about that painting do you think turned Diebenkorn off?

MR. MCLEAN: Well, I think - well, not that he - I just think it was such a cloyingly illustrative, book-illustration-type thing. Basically, all I had was the kind of habits I developed in high school, pen-and-ink illustrations and things, because my original idea - if I would have gone to Chicago - well, even after I decided to go to California, my first ambition was to be a commercial artist. A lot of art students start off that way.

MR. STIEBER: Right.

MR. MCLEAN: Then I got a little braver and thought, well, gee, I would like to be a serious artist, an actual painter or something. But you had to get a degree and certificate in teaching if you expected to make a living.

You go in and you major in education. Then if you really see the light, you just go for a straight fine arts degree in painting or sculpture or whatever your medium is. And so I was still going to be an illustrator at that time.

But then I just rapidly went from one and changed to another. And the thing that made this happen for me when I was enrolled as an education major, a teaching certificate major, and I was thinking of teaching high school or something like that - but I had this example of people like Nate [Nathan] Oliveira, people like Richard Diebenkorn, who were teaching on the college level and supporting their painting. In other words, they could be artists and teachers at the same time. Eureka! And I thought, well, that would be really quite a life, but on terms that would allow me to really commit myself to painting.

Diebenkorn had a show of his Berkeley series landscapes, abstract landscapes, in the old auditorium on campus there at CCAC. And I walked into that room, and I saw those things. And man, I just connected immediately with them. To me, that was what painting was about. I mean, everywhere I looked on those canvases, that kind of mainline connection between paint and personality just was so obvious in those things. And I instantly knew what made him make every mark, you know. It just told me what painting was about.

And, you know, he only said a couple of cryptic things to me in all the time I was with him. I had studied with him for two years. But he taught me by example more than anything he ever said. I remember one time he said - took a painting outside the room and took a look at it. And he always seemed to be very puzzled, you know.

MR. STIEBER: Put his hand over his mouth.

MR. MCLEAN: Put his hand over his mouth, up on his cheek. It wasn't because he was struggling with a thought or that the painting confounded him somehow. It was more of a question going on in his head as to how can I make this idiot understand what it is I want to tell him, you know. And he said, why don't you just put this away for a little while, and then take it back out and look at it - six months or so from now.

Let it sit. Let some of that growth happen, and then come back and look, and you will be able to answer your own question. Well, that is the kind of wisdom that he was capable of, which I was a little young to understand at the time - or naive, I should say.

So that was a very - a big epiphany for me. I went right up to the administration office and changed my major right there to fine arts.

MR. STIEBER: What year was that? Do you remember?

MR. MCLEAN: Probably '56 or '57. Yeah. I started in the fall of '55, fall of '56. It could have been the fall of '56 or early '57.

MR. STIEBER: Okay.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah. And then weird things would happen, like unexpected things. Like one time, I think Diebenkorn told me why don't I start a new canvas, because the one I had been working on just is starting to take on the surface of a plum pudding.

It was just layer after layer, lumps of paint, you know, just getting confectionary almost. And so I realized I just painted it to death, you know, and still wasn't satisfied with it. So I took it off the stretcher and rolled it up. Of course, in those days, because canvas was expensive - it seemed to us anyway - for us, it was - you would paint over and over a canvas until you got something you liked. Assumedly, the painting would become richer and richer as it got more layers.

But you reach a certain point and then it becomes overripe.

MR. STIEBER: Overworked?

MR. MCLEAN: Yes. So I rolled it up and stuffed it in an ashcan on campus there. And Manuel Neri came by one day, and I guess it was right after I stuffed it in there. And he reached in and pulled it out. He said, are you through with this? Do you want this anymore? No, no, I just tossed it, man. Can I have it? I said, yeah, sure, why not? So he took it. To him, that was like - that was like - that canvas was in the condition of being a good start.

So he took it. I couldn't understand why. It had been condemned by the teacher, yet taken up by somebody that I understood was one of the brighter, sharper students on campus.

MR. STIEBER: Did you ever see that canvas again? Do you know what ever became of it?

MR. MCLEAN: No. He might have thrown it away himself again after a while.

But at that time, I would go up to the library, and they would get an issue in of ARTnews. So I would be in contact with what was going on back east. It had reproductions of the East Coast painters, Franz Kline and [Willem] de Kooning. De Kooning became a real favorite of mine. Basically my two big influences were de Kooning and Diebenkorn. And Diebenkorn was just actually starting out on his figure series after abandoning the Berkeley series. So I was always a little behind on his development.

I always kind of tagged along. And I started getting into the figurative thing by the time he had gone into the Ocean Park [series].

MR. STIEBER: Who else was a CCAC when you were there that you remember?

MR. MCLEAN: Nate was there, Nate Oliveira. There were various people who were later to become famous, very accomplished. Bob [Robert] Arneson was there. He later became a very close friend of mine. Gosh. The other painters - people would come and go. There were more or less a constant cadre. I mean, a guy named Harry Krell, you know. Jason Schoener was head of the painting department. And he was always a good friend, a very sweet guy, had a home back in Cape Cod [MA]. He would go to Greece, and he would make sketches and come back home and paint them, you know. He was kind of a quasi-abstract painter, kind of European-looking, white-washed village scenes, you know, in a Greek landscape kind of thing.

And Jason was always - I took a couple of courses from him, too, painting courses. It wasn't terribly influential, because it seemed like anything I did was okay by him. I mean, he was very good, very good, pat on the back, tugging on his pipe, and, you know, more of a kind of good cheer rather than critical.

Harry Krell, on the other hand, was really a little German martinet. I remember one little story. We were looking at - I was sitting on the graduate committee. This was - I think maybe it was after I had gotten out of the army and I started teaching at Arts and Crafts, in 1963. And Harry was still there. And Erik Stern was another guy. These guys came over from Germany during the Nazi era. And they got work in various art schools and art departments in the area. They stuck around, you know. They weren't moving from one place to another.

Diebenkorn would teach at CCAC. Then he would teach over at the Art Institute [of California] in San Francisco. Then he might take a - he took leave and went to New Mexico, Albuquerque, and taught there for a year, something like that.

But those guys were like permanent cadre, Schoener and Krell and Stern. Stern was a theatrical designer, stage designer, taught at Arts and Crafts something called "Logical Form" -shading and modeling of geometric solids and all that kind of thing.

Anyway, Harry was at this graduate committee. It was right after I took over Charles Gill's drawing courses when he went to New York in '63. And I think it was at that period rather than when I was a student. I wasn't involved in any graduate reviews. But George Miyasaki was there. He is probably retired now, I think, from teaching at Cal-Berkeley [University of Californiam Berkeley] for years. He was there at CCAC, by the way, while Nate was there. He and Nate taught printmaking there - lithography - both very good printmakers.

MR. STIEBER: I have one of Nate's prints hanging in my office.

MR. MCLEAN: Oh, you do?

MR. STIEBER: Yeah.

MR. MCLEAN: What series?

MR. STIEBER: It is one he did for the Archives of American Art many years ago. It is a shipwreck. It is an etching of a shipwreck.

MR. MCLEAN: It wasn't one of the Sites series, was it?

MR. STIEBER: Yes, yes, exactly.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, okay.

MR. STIEBER: Yeah, that is right.

MR. MCLEAN: Because some of those - they were very interesting - [inaudible]. Of course, when Nate - when I was influenced by him, and he was showing all the time at the museums and everything around here, it was the figures - the spectral figures. I loved his work, too, and I still do. He had a little different slant on it than

Diebenkorn had. I mean, it was basically the spatial, thing and the figure-ground relationship was very different from Diebenkorn's.

But anyway, George Miyasaki was sitting there. And I forget whose work we were discussing. But Harry Krell was also there. He drove a little Thunderbird. He was a playboy type. But he was a strict disciplinarian. You could paint an abstract painting, but you had to be able to rationalize and verbalize every little brushstroke that you made. It had to have a purpose behind it. It had to have a reason for being there. It couldn't be just "feeling" and all that.

So he was puzzling over this thing and had a particularly difficult time with it. And finally, George said, well - and George is not the most articulate guy in the world - he said, well, geez, Harry, you have just got to be hip, you know? Harry says, hip? What is this hip?

Oh, man. You couldn't get him to understand. He just wasn't with it. No way in a thousand years you are going to get this guy to understand. So that wasn't a particularly interesting semester I had when I was a student so many years before with Harry. But Diebenkorn I really liked, because it was more relaxed. We had guys in there like Bruce McGaw, who later taught over at the Art Institute. Hank Villierme was in that class. These were senior painters. And just a sense of professionalism somehow, you know. It was really great to be there.

Now, you mentioned other shows.

MR. STIEBER: Oh, yes, that you saw?

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, it was in '63. I mentioned that story about Harry Krell. But in '60 - I had just gotten out of the army. I was in graduate school at Mills College [Oakland, CA]. And it was when the - I remember it being a very influential show: "The Art of Assemblage" [Museum of Modern Art, 1961]. I think the Modern in New York put it together, and it was traveling around the country. One of those venues was San Francisco, the Museum of Modern Art. And you had - [Robert] Rauschenberg's Monogram [1955-59] was in there. Canyon [Rauschenberg, 1959] - [inaudible] - that was there. Our local guy, Bruce Conner.

MR. STIEBER: One of my favorites.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, Ratbastard [1958], I think, was in there, that piece of his. It was just a terribly exciting show. And that had a lot of influence on me, too. I mean, that was the real beginning of the Pop era, beyond Abstract Expressionism. So, of course, with Rauschenberg and Johns, you had a lot of Abstract Expressionism involved there. There were intonations of early Pop going on, too, because this was around 1960, '61, something like that.

I had just gotten out of the service.

MR. STIEBER: I want to talk about your time in the service. But I want to back up first to see your years as a student at CCAC. Did you ever show your own work while you were a student there?

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, in those days, it was always kind of looked upon askance. I mean, if the work was good enough, you wanted to show it. But if they knew you were a student, it was a bit dodgy. You weren't supposed to be a student in professional exhibitions.

MR. STIEBER: Right.

MR. MCLEAN: If you were showing, it was usually in one or another of the competitive annuals that they used to have. The annuals were very important. And they were the main venues of exposure for artists who didn't have a New York connection. And there wasn't much to be connected with in New York, and even less in California. I mean, you had the Sixth Gallery, Rose Rabow's gallery, you know, three or four galleries, basically. And if you weren't connected just right, you weren't in those.

And so somebody who was, say, a junior or a senior in art school, where would he show if it weren't for the Jack London Square open art festival or some other annual? You had the sculpture annuals and the painting annuals. I think it was sculpture and printmaking, and then painting was a separate show up at the Richmond Art Center. And so you had San Francisco, Richmond, Jack London Square. You had four of five annuals that you could show your work in, if you got accepted by the jury.

And so those were our main means of exposure until Bob and I joined up with the group that started the Berkeley Gallery.

MR. STIEBER: Bob?

MR. MCLEAN: Bob [Robert] Bechtle.

MR. STIEBER: Bob Bechtle.

MR. MCLEAN: In '64, I think it was. It was a co-op gallery. And it turned - it was quite a phenomenon, too. We had some really good artists in there. And we would have guest artists come and show, too.

MR. STIEBER: But that was after you were already out of the service?

MR. MCLEAN: That was after I was out of the service, yeah. I had been dodging the service while I was at CCAC, ever since I was eligible to be drafted, being - what was it - 18? You had to be 18 or something like that. So my draft board was situated in Idaho, and they followed you around the country. You know, it didn't matter where you moved to. Your draft board is always where you got listed first.

So I would just write letters to them and say, look, can you please give me a year or so? I - just to get my degree, and then I will be happy to serve. So they kept deferring me. The draft board up there kept giving me deferrals, until I got my B.F.A at Arts and Crafts. So in April of - I think it was April - in April of '58 I was drafted. Two years later, I got mustered out.

Went down to Fort Ord [CA]. Took my basic down there.

MR. STIEBER: Where is that?

MR. MCLEAN: At Fort Ord, down by Monterey.

MR. STIEBER: Okay.

MR. MCLEAN: In California on the coast there, not too far from here. Then I did my second basic training - six weeks of that training. And then you went for your MOS [Military Occupation Specialty] assignment, your job description - or what is going to be your job description.

MR. STIEBER: What does MOS stand for? Something of service?

MR. MCLEAN: Military Occupation Specialty. That is where you get trained in what it is you are going to be doing while you are in the army. Basic training just teaches you how to fire an M-1 rifle and gets you discipline, how to march in order and how to do, you know, the basics. And then you go to a specialized school for training. Those of us with college degrees all of a sudden got smitten by religion, and we always wanted to join the chaplain's corps.

But I could have made more of an issue, maybe, and gotten into special services or something, because that would be the thing to get into. Then you are - you do, you know, artwork and various things, anything that has to do with the - [inaudible] - arts, that sort of thing.

But anyway, I didn't do that. I went to Fort Bliss, Texas, for my second period of training before being stationed permanently. I think I started that in September. You get some time off; go home with your family and stuff. Then you have to report back to then be sent to wherever you are going to get your specialized training. So it seemed like it was around September, something like that, because by October, I was at my permanent station.

So I went to Fort Bliss, in El Paso, which is close to Juarez. I saw my first bullfight there.

MR. STIEBER: That was '60 -

MR. MCLEAN: That was '58.

MR. STIEBER: Oh, '58. That is right.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, 1958, still '58, late '58, fall of '58. I made some friendships that lasted me through the rest of the tour. Henry Danziger was a young guy that had just graduated Brooklyn College [City University of New York] in theatrical lighting design. No, by gosh, he got a degree in chemistry - in chemistry. He was going to work for Spreckel's Sugar, or he started work for them, or something.

Anyway, he was a four-year college grad. He had his B.S. degree. But he was interested in theatrical lighting design and wound up - after he got out of the army - wound up finally as an assistant to the prop master for the New York City Ballet and the New York City Opera. And has since retired from those jobs. Sharp guy.

Dean Swenson was a graduate of San Jose State [University, CA], I think in engineering or something, I think it was. Then there was a guy named Joe Demato from Amsterdam, New York, a roly-poly, fat guy, very vivacious guy. Oh, no, Joe Demico.



MR. STIEBER: Demico.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, Demico. And Ed Escobar, a law school graduate from Cal-Berkeley. But anyway, those of us who were college graduates kind of got routed by our senior officers into certain favored positions in this outfit. And the outfit was anti-aircraft guided missiles. A guy with a painting degree, and here I am working, you know - I barely know how to plug in an extension cord.

So we were sent to missile school at Fort Bliss. And at that time, they were changing from the Nike Ajax to the Nike Hercules, bigger missile, more range and was capable of carrying a nuclear warhead. Every allied country denied having any of those, but we knew better. So I was trained on a radar - the missile-tracking radar. After a launch, my radar would track the path of the missile.

Swenson and Demico and Escobar - there are three guys on the other console who operated the target-tracking radar. And they would track the target. And so my trajectory and the trajectory of the target would be computed in the computer down in the control van. And anytime the target changed direction or something, the missile would change to correct it, so that whichever way it went, they finally met up.

So anyway, we were supposed to take that system and go up and convert the anti-aircraft World War II cannons into the modern missile age in Alaska - form a kind of protective ring around Anchorage. And there was a lot of talk about taking our wives with us and there are going to be \$5 hamburgers. Wish you could get a hamburger for five bucks today. But that was horrendous. You couldn't imagine. But we were going to, you know, get parkas and all that stuff.

And all of a sudden that summer, the Chinese started shelling Quemoy and Matsu [Taiwanese islands between mainland China and Taiwan] and, of course, threatening Taiwan. And so that redirected our mission. So we went from Alaska to Okinawa [Japan]. That meant short sleeves and shorts. Tropical gear.

So anyway, we went there, landed in October, I guess, and the barracks weren't finished yet. The Okinawans were building those. And we lived in tents until the barracks were finished and we could move in. A pad had been constructed for the radars.

This thing about all the college graduates. We formed a kind of clique. We tended to hang together because all of us knew who [Marcel] Proust was.

And then you had the launcher area, the fire control area and then a series of cables that ran for about a mile down to the launcher area. And those guys were the grease monkeys, the mechanics, kept things oiled and greased.

MR. STIEBER: Right.

MR. MCLEAN: So they were a different caliber of guys. A lot of guys from the South, a lot of guys probably had shoes on for the first time in their lives.

And it was really a very dramatic difference. They would go hang out at bars, and we would be hanging out at the library or someplace, you know. We rented - I remember we rented - Henry and I rented a house down in Yomitan, which was a little village about a mile from our battery there.

And our mission, of course, was to take out all the World War II armaments - anti-aircraft armaments - and replace them with missiles, bring them into the nuclear age. And we also had Formosa [Taiwan] down below, too, and they had already had their missile system set up. But with Okinawa there, intersecting theaters of fire would make it impenetrable for the Chinese to get through. Also it could easily counter the Chinese attacking from the west into Taiwan.

So that was our mission. But on the time off, we rented this room, a couple of rooms with this Okinawan family. And I turned my little room into a studio. And I remember having a picture from Time magazine pinned to the wall. I think it was a reproduction of de Kooning's Gotham News [1955]. And that was my inspiration.

[END CARD 2.]

MR. STIEBER: This is Jason Stieber interviewing Richard McLean at the artist's home in Castro Valley, California, on September 20, 2009, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is memory card number three.

[Audio break.]

MR. MCLEAN: Oh, yeah, I think I - yeah, in one of our scrapbooks, actually, I still have a picture of me with the obligatory cigarette dangling out of my mouth and doing an abstract expressionist painting on the makeshift

easel I'd built. It was a very spare, simple kind of studio arrangement, just a room with – I forget what I was using for an easel. It wasn't a proper easel, just a couple boards or something, tacked up somehow, that I could put a couple of nails into or something.

I did enter – interesting story – I was doing some collage work while I was there, and, of course, I've always been a total, devoted fan of Kurt Schwitters. I love Schwitters, and a little addendum to that, my last show in New York – no, not my last show, my next-to-last show – just three or four years ago, coincided with a Schwitters show at the Ubu Gallery in New York City. It was off the beaten path where you find galleries, so I didn't even know where it was for a while. I finally looked it up this time.

But when I was there before and I had a show at Miesel's uptown – Miesel.Bernarducci[.Gallery] – and I went around and saw some of the usual galleries, went across the street to Marlborough [Gallery] and did the usual round. I knew – no, I guess I didn't know that there was a Schwitters show in town, because I'd been looking at the wrong information. I get the New Yorker at home here by subscription, but I was looking at the New York City Art Guide or something like that, looking at the New York Times, and thought I had the shows pretty well cased, what was going on at the Frick [Collection], at the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art], and so on.

I get home and I read something about this Schwitters show, and I realized too late that Ubu had listed their exhibition of Schwitters in the New Yorker, not the New York City Art Guide. It was the first show of Schwitters collages, the classic little collages, outside Europe and the first one in the United States in I don't know how many years, if ever. And I had missed this thing. I mean, I'd kill to see a Schwitters show, and I walked right past it! I was wasting time going into other galleries and looking at things that I wasn't particularly interested in, and I could have seen this show, and I missed it. So what was I talking about – Schwitters?

MR. STIEBER: You missed the show because you looked in the wrong magazine.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, yeah, but I already told you about that. I jumped ahead to that to get back to –

MR. STIEBER: We were talking about Okinawa.

MR. MCLEAN: Oh, oh, yeah. So I was into Schwitters a lot and the little found scraps of paper and flotsam and jetsam he collected.

MR. STIEBER: You were doing collage work.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, and I was collecting a box of stuff like I had back home, too, of little bits of papers and things, and they were kind of interesting because they were from Asia. They had Japanese printed on them. The great thing about – one of the interesting mysteries about those of us who can't read Chinese or Japanese or Arabic, these words just take on a purely visual look to them, because you can't make sense out of them in terms of language. So they retain a strong abstract, formal quality, as shapes.

So I was collecting, saving bits of my cigarettes before they would burn all the way down to the filter, and I'd peel them off. I love that kind of darkened brown fringe of the burnt part. Then I started making collages out of – using yen notes and bits of thread, ticket stubs and receipts, rice paper and cigarette papers and whatnot. I made several collages, and one of them I submitted to the all-military art show at Kadena Air Base [Okinawa] there, a competition – a juried competition – and must have been somebody hip on the jury, because I won first prize. All the marines, the naval people, the army people, and I got first prize, and I thought, geez, boy, that's unusual. I thought some Christ's head on black velvet would take first place.

MR. STIEBER: What year was that?

MR. MCLEAN: That was – it might have been '59, maybe. Yeah, all these dates are within six months to a year. But I thought, my gosh, that's pretty hip. They did a thing in Stars and Stripes [military newspaper], mentioned the event in Stars and Stripes that came out of Tokyo. But interestingly enough, I was reading the piece in Stars and Stripes, and it said – because I called it Collage Number Two, something like that, Collage Number Two came out in print as College Number Two.

There was a young PFC [Private First Class] that just got transferred to our battery office as the company clerk. He had worked at Kadena when this show took place. He's the one who sent the dispatches or something to the newspaper or whatever, and he told me why it came out looking like that. This guy's a college grad, too. The kid's last name was Selfridge – no, the London department store is Selfridges. His name was Helfridge, and I can't remember his first name. But his last name was Helfridge. He said, well, you know, he's working with a – here again, another one of these things – the guy who has the one stripe on his arm is a college graduate, and his three-striper superior has no education at all. A good ol' boy from Georgia. Lifers, they were called.

MR. STIEBER: Right.

MR. MCLEAN: The sergeant looked at this thing, and he says, hey - he says, "What the hell does this mean anyway?" He says, "College, he doesn't even know how to spell college." And Helfridge said, "No, Sarge, you've got it wrong. He spelled it right. It's called collage. It's French. You know, it's like you make an image by pasting bits of stuff together." The sergeant had never heard of such a thing, the process or the word.

But his pride wouldn't let him say, oh, well, you know best; go ahead and put it in. No, he insisted I meant college, he meant college. You put that down as college. Well, what was Helfridge going to do, get sent up or something on a charge of disobeying an order? So this cracker gets his way, and it comes out College Number Two. This kind of thing happens all the time. I'm sure people suffer this a lot, but I was really incensed about that.

So anyway, I tried to carry on some semblance of a creative life while I was there during my tour. I was there for two typhoon seasons. About 18 months. You wind up looking like an illiterate, while the real perpetrator remains anonymous.

MR. STIEBER: And you were working in, sort of, the Abstract Expressionist vein and non -

[Cross talk.]

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, totally out of de Kooning and - well in this case de Kooning and Diebenkorn and Schwitters, totally non-objective abstraction, which I still have strong sympathies for a vision, as a way of form building. I have nothing against that. I don't see in some ways that much difference between that and what I'm doing there in those pictures.

MR. STIEBER: Your own pictures?

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah. I said once in another publication - in 1980 I think it was - that even though my big influences locally here were Diebenkorn and Nate Oliveira, I said, I like to think that even though our images nowadays differ greatly, you put these horses up against Diebenkorn's Ocean Park series. I'd like to think we still share a lot of the same kind of formal concerns and whatnot.

So I prefer to think that way about those, and while I was making the transition into realism from abstraction, it didn't seem that traumatic to me. It just seemed kind of like, why not? It just eventuated. I kept seeing - and that's what I see today when I look at these things - I see them formalistically first before I see them in terms of their iconography.

MR. STIEBER: Right, right. So was Darlene with you in Okinawa?

MR. MCLEAN: No, unless you were an officer, you had to be - in that pay grade - you had to be a commissioned officer in order to take your - I think it was up to E4 or something like that, E5 and better, I think you could take your wife if you wanted to.

MR. STIEBER: So you were there for two years. You made work, won a prize.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah.

MR. STIEBER: And you came back to California in 1963?

MR. MCLEAN: Nineteen sixty, in April '60.

MR. STIEBER: Oh, 1960, okay.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah.

MR. STIEBER: And you started teaching immediately at CCAC?

MR. MCLEAN: No, I started Mills College that fall.

MR. STIEBER: Oh, that's right, that's right.

MR. MCLEAN: Graduate school, and went two years to Mills and studied art history. I actually discovered art history at Mills. I'd been sort of fighting it all the way through art school. It was too - I just didn't see the relevance of it particularly. I wanted to be kind of with it and in the scene and making paintings like Diebenkorn. I spent most of my time trying to emulate him and paint his kind of pictures, and studying about those old cathedrals and all that stuff just didn't make good sense to me.

But I took my art history classes under Alfred Neumeyer at Mills College. Ernest Mundt was another guy at San

Francisco State [University, CA]. And John Gutmann, a good friend of mine and office mate at San Francisco State. Gutmann fled the Nazis, too, and most of those guys came over here at that time, in the '30s, 1933 or shortly after, and took up teaching in American colleges, and a lot of them in the Bay area.

So Alfred Neumeyer, I think, probably came for that reason. He taught modern art history to – it was an all-girl college except on the graduate level. At that level it was co-ed.

MR. STIEBER: At Mills?

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, at Mills. So I was one of the few males in the class, and Neumeyer would – he had his assistant in the back room behind the lecture hall and the podium out front. He could descend from the podium and out through a door and to his study in the back. He'd come in – I remember the door opening, and he'd come in with sort of a flourish, with all of his robes flowing, his professorial robes.

MR. STIEBER: He wore that to class?

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, he wore it to class. And he'd get up in front of the podium carrying John Canaday's text *Mainstreams of Modern Art* [New York: Holt, 1959], and that's what we – he taught from that. It was a solid year, two semesters, to cover the subject. But he was such a fascinating teacher. As a student in Germany he remembered looking out the window of his second floor apartment and seeing the model. It was this artist model that would come by his place every day on the way to the studio to be painted by [Auguste] Renoir.

MR. STIEBER: A French painter?

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, Neumeyer might have been in Paris at the time as a young student himself. But he really knew his subject. He really turned me on to art history. I began to pay attention. I began to really absorb what it was he was saying, and I was reading the text, actually. So that was kind of a forward jolt in my education which I was very grateful for.

Otherwise my painting advisor was Ralph DuCasse.

MR. STIEBER: Could you spell that?

MR. MCLEAN: D-U-C-A-S-S-E, Ralph DuCasse, had somewhat of a local reputation here during the '50s and '60s. He basically took us in and told us – there were two or three of us that year that were grad painters, and he knew our work from the annuals that he'd seen us show in over the years. And he says, you know, you stay out of my hair, and I'll stay out of yours, and I'll see you in two years. So we basically kept our own counsel. There was some attempt to have, I think at the end of every year or semester, a kind of forum or seminar where we all kind of get together. It was next to no educational value other than what you could just absorb yourself, which was okay by me, because I was on a roll, and I was looking elsewhere for my inspiration.

I didn't need whatever it was they were offering there at Mills, other than I wanted a master's degree. I got an M.F.A. there. I met Bob Arneson while I was there, and I was his teaching assistant for a semester, got some scholarship money to help pay for tuition. Arneson and I became really good friends and remained so right up until he died in '93, I think it was. I still have a piece out in the backyard of his, a couple of pieces in the front yard here, too, before he became Bob Arneson, when he was just more or less a student of Peter Voulkos, when he was making these tormented, tortured clay pieces and breaking away from the traditional kind of approach to ceramics as decorated utilitarian objects and making them into something one could call sculpture – art.

Of course, John Mason down in LA was doing the same thing, making clay slab sculptures. So Bob was part of that revolution. So I watched him grow. We shared a studio one year there in East Oakland, not far from Mills. He was doing a lot of collage work with wheat paste and tissue papers, colored tissue papers and whatnot. I was doing a number of things kind of influenced by [Wayne] Thiebaud at the time. I was beginning to pick up on Wayne's work, and Wayne knew Bob pretty well, and they both wound up teaching at UC-Davis [University of California, Davis]. I met Wayne Thiebaud through Arneson. We were over at the de Young Museum [San Francisco, CA] when Wayne had his first museum show over there. He was stacking stuff around the room, figuring out how it was going to work on the wall.

MR. STIEBER: What year was that?

MR. MCLEAN: That would have been, probably, '61. So anyway, I began – in those years Pop art, the Oakland Art Museum had an exhibition of art very early on, all of the LA art painters, Lynn Foulkes, Billy Al Bengston, a lot of the local guys down there. Ed Ruscha was in there, his gas station painting. That was pretty startling stuff to see at the art museum.

So I think it was the reemergence of subject matter back into painting, but it was treated in a very different way

than the nostalgics would have painted it or the realists. The Pop artists were fighting their battles, too, to come up with that. Then I wound up later fighting against them to get to where I was. I mean, each generation seems to – or each vision seems to generate a counterrevolution that goes on and on and on.

MR. STIEBER: Right.

MR. MCLEAN: So the '60s I look at as an extremely turbulent and fecund decade for me. I made some major changes then. I was doing Diebenkorn-esque abstract paintings in 1960, and by 1970 I was well into my current realist style.

MR. STIEBER: Talk a little about your personal life while you were at Mills, what was going on, had you had any children yet.

MR. MCLEAN: No children. I think it was nine years after we got married before our first child. So it was around '64 by the time we had our son, because we worked it out. We had planned. We said, look, I've got to get self-sustaining. I've got to be able to support a family before we bring a family into the world. So the main thing is to get me educated, get my degrees in place, get set up, because I knew well by that time that teaching on the college level was what I wanted to do, because it was the kind of teaching gig that would give me the maximum amount of time in the studio. I was at that time strictly a local talent, no cachet in New York. I wasn't anywhere ready for a New York exhibit.

So we just held off until '64, and then three years later our daughter was born. By that time, I was at San Francisco State, and I was teaching in '63 – also at CCAC.

MR. STIEBER: At CCAC?

MR. MCLEAN: At CCAC. So I got out of Mills in '62. I was teaching – I took over my friend's classes, beginning drawing classes, at CCAC.

MR. STIEBER: What was his name?

MR. MCLEAN: Charles Gill.

MR. STIEBER: Oh, you've mentioned him.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, not to be confused with your fellow Texan Charles Gill. That was a weird situation. Charlie did some paintings of Marilyn Monroe just before Life magazine came out with a spread of the Charles Gill in Texas doing Marilyn Monroe pictures. And not only that, they looked like they could have been painted by Chuck here. They were in the same style, the same paint handling almost. It was eerie and more than a little unsettling for Charlie. All of a sudden it was like throwing a bomb into the middle of a crowd. It really was shocking.

So anyway, Charles Gill, he was a very precocious painter, and when we were showing at the Berkeley Gallery, Bechtle, Charlie, and I – I was just reading a review last night in an old art magazine, and they reviewed a show of mine at the Berkeley Gallery. Gosh, I think it was the – I can't think of her name right now, but she was maybe a stringer for ARTnews or something out here. She did the review of that show, and she said, it's almost impossible to talk about Richard McLean's paintings without referencing Charles Gill's paintings. They use very much the same style, came out of the same mix of influences and whatnot.

I was a little ticked off at that. I thought, why can't I be – I see a lot of reviews done where other artists whose influences obviously are at work in their paintings and should be mentioned and they aren't mentioned. It's just they're very discreet nowadays. But she just kind of took some air out of my balloon. But Charlie and I were very close friends, though we don't see that much of each other anymore because he's retired from Arts and Crafts. He's living in Boise, Idaho, now. So we don't connect too much.

MR. STIEBER: So, just so I get the facts, your children's names are?

MR. MCLEAN: My children's names are Ian – Ian is my son's name – and Caitlin is my daughter's name.

MR. STIEBER: Could you spell Caitlin?

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, C-A-I-T-L-I-N, as in Caitlin Thomas, Dylan's wife, after which we named our daughter. So I thought, well, a good Scots last name and an English first name. But anyway, that's Caitlin.

MR. STIEBER: So you were at Mills. You got out of Mills?

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, in spring of '62, worked briefly between the time I got out of Mills – it was really kind of hard

to get work. I finally went to work for Sather Gate bookstore in Berkeley, in their shipping and handling department.

MR. STIEBER: Sorry, what was it called again?

MR. MCLEAN: Sather Gate, S-A-T-H-E-R, it's the main gate going into the campus off of Telegraph Avenue, goes up through there. Yeah, then in '63, I got the gig at Arts and Crafts, and that fall, I hadn't been teaching more than a couple months, and that's when Kennedy was assassinated. And I remember that morning. I remember hearing it over the radio, over the news, and standing outside the studio around the corner of the back of the studio in tears. It really, really moved me.

Then I went home after classes and stuck to the TV just nonstop, as most people did. But I taught there till '65, part-time. In the meantime - I think it was about that same year - I landed classes at San Francisco State. So I spent what, maybe less than a year, maybe eight months or nine months, something like that, working at Sather Gate.

Then Alex Nepote, who was teaching at San Francisco State - he was chairman of the painting area over there, N-E-P-O-T-E, Alex Nepote. I've got a watercolor of his that his wife gave me after he died, for doing an assessment of the market value of his work. I think it was painted the year after I was born. I mean, he was quite my senior.

But he always liked my painting, there again from having seen it in the various annuals and he actually shared an exhibition wall with me in several shows. And he, again, was like a local talent, like DuCasse. He was locally known quite a bit around the area. He told me at one time, he says, oh, yeah, anytime you want to teach, let me know, and I'll see what we can do.

Fortunately, at that time, California was in an educational boom. They were hiring, expanding their faculties. So I got two classes. Generally, you never knew from one semester to the next if you'd get one class or two classes. So I pretty much had two classes. At Arts and Crafts, I had a morning. I started at 8:30 or 8:15, something like that - two classes, one right after the other, in beginning drawing. Then I had about an hour to get in the car, get over the bridge, get over to Lake Merced, the San Francisco State campus, in time for afternoon classes there.

I'd teach two three-hour classes there in painting, so all of a sudden I went from rags to riches. I had almost more teaching than I could handle, albeit a part-timer's salary. But, boy, it was, like, I was fully employed and I'm still making art. Teaching never got in the way. I always seemed to have enough energy left over for studio time, and if I was teaching at San Francisco State, it was two days a week. At CCAC it was also two days a week and the same days. So if I did a Monday, Wednesday, I'd have Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday off. And that was exactly what I had always heard about teaching college level - it left you enough time for your own work.

MR. STIEBER: Cram it into one -

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, you'd try to get it in one block. Someone like Arneson, when he taught up at Davis, he'd have a little bit of a drive from Benecia up to Davis, and so they'd have facilities up there, a studio cot or something, where you could stay over. And he'd just keep a toothbrush and whatnot there and wouldn't have to be coming home. A lot of people do that, will teach from two to three days someplace, and they'd come home because it's too far to drive back and forth continuously.

So anyway, in '65 I was asked - actually Chuck had come back. He went away to New York City, spent about nine months there, and didn't do too well in terms of gallery connections. I went with him one day when - he also by that time had taken a job at Buffalo [University at Buffalo, the State University of New York] - the university - and when I went back to New York in '67 - my first trip to New York was in '67, I think, something like that, and he came down; he and his wife, Elaine, came down from Buffalo to take some paintings around to the galleries. And I was staying with an English artist named Tony Harrison, who'd worked as a printmaker under William Hayter. He had some connection with John Coplans, but he didn't like Coplans. They didn't get along too well.

But anyway, Tony came over here and was working in America and living in New York City, and he loved it over here. It was about the time the Beatles were getting big. So they showed us all around New York, took us to all the main places where tourists would go. I saw my first opera there, Lucia di Lammermoor with Joan Sutherland and Richard Tucker, and we just did a lot of things that were a kind of whirlwind introduction to New York City. It was great.

MR. STIEBER: How did you meet Tony?

MR. MCLEAN: I met Tony when he was invited by John Ihle, who was head of the printmaking department at San Francisco State. They invited him out to teach as a guest artist for a semester or so. Ihle, by the way, was subject – Joan Ihle was the subject of my first horse painting. Yeah, it's in a book somewhere. But we just kind of took to each other and traded a couple pieces.

So we went back, and I met Richard Reubens, who was teaching at NYU [New York University, New York City], I think, at the time, or Columbia [University, New York, City], because Tony was teaching at Columbia. I think Reubens was also teaching at Columbia. He had somewhat of a national reputation as a painter, and he had weird assignments he'd give his students. He'd say, paint the inside of your mouth. There'd always be some student sticking a paintbrush in their mouth and running it around – or so I'd been told.

But who's the other guy, taught at NYU, sculpture – taught sculpture at NYU, used chrome bumper parts from these big-finned automobiles – yeah, his name was Jason Seegal.

MR. STIEBER: Yeah.

MR. MCLEAN: Anyway, Seegal introduced me to several of his artist friends and people that taught there at NYU and Columbia. So I later gave a lecture to students at Columbia grad school that Tony got for me.

As I said, Chuck had come down from Buffalo, and we got in his van, and it was a winter, cold winter day, around Christmastime as a matter of fact, because it was the Christmas that Joan Sutherland gave her performance at the opera. It was on Christmas Eve. I was the only guy in the audience that I noticed was in a brown corduroy jacket with leather patches on the elbows.

MR. STIEBER: I think that was your uniform for a while.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, so anyway, Charlie went to see Leo Castelli, among other galleries. We went to Dintenfass [Terry Dintenfass, Inc.], I think, and some others. I followed him up the stairs to Leo's gallery, and Leo was over in a corner talking with some matron, and so there wasn't any reason for me to introduce myself or anything like that. And I was doing some things, which at that time were animal-oriented and almost just edging into '67. That was when I did my first horse picture. But I'd been doing some paintings of animals taken from various sources, encyclopedias and stuff like that, and actually adding the color, because the source photos were in black and white, halftone photographs. I'd take things from newspaper clippings and whatnot. So I guess you could say I was basically in my animal period. Nobody else was doing animals of any kind that I could see, and so it seemed to be wide open territory to explore.

So from '66 to '67, I made the change to horses, because after I did the John Ihle painting with the horse, I realized, hey, there's something to this. This is really a part of America, or Americana, part of the American heritage that you can't get with a cow. I mean, a cow's a cow anywhere, but the horse and its historical significance, its mythology is much, much more.

MR. STIEBER: The American West.

MR. MCLEAN: The American West, the opening of the west, and things began to percolate. But prior to '67, '65 to '66 I think, that whole year in there, I was doing these animal pictures, rams, chickens, cows, et cetera. I had a show in '66 at the Berkeley Gallery, and that was the last of those.

MR. STIEBER: Of those animal works.

MR. MCLEAN: Of those animal works, yeah. It was a mishmash of things. There was a couple of – something I called Odalisque Discotheque, which was a skimpily clad barfly lying on a divan or something, with a cigarette and dark sunglasses on, a chemise, and it was just something I saw in a newspaper. In those days I wasn't committed to any particular imagery. If I was committed to anything, it was the process of working from images that came from photographs. But they weren't my photographs.

MR. STIEBER: Right. Finish your story about going – visiting Leo Castelli Gallery with Chuck.

MR. MCLEAN: Oh, yeah. That's when I first saw Ivan Karp. He was sitting at the desk. Leo's standing over there in a corner quietly chatting with this woman, and here was Ivan sitting behind the desk seeming to be the engine behind everything, and he was, like, ordering a ham and cheese on rye or something on the phone, and looking at somebody's slides with the other hand, and telling an artist what would be best for his career and whatever, which, one of his famous lines is, well, that isn't quite what we handle here, but I can give you a name of two or three other people that would be interested in this sort of thing. He'd always let them down easily and in a polite way and make them think that, gee, I just found out something important. You just got turned down is what you did.

But he seemed to be just handling a dozen different things at one time, and I just kind of stood there in amazement at this guy. And I didn't introduce myself or anything to him. I didn't know him. He didn't know me, didn't know my work. These cow pictures and animal pictures weren't quite ready for New York, and I just could tell they weren't. When they were ready, I kind of knew it. I knew it was ready. That was my first encounter with him. So when he was spoken of later on, I knew – had an image of who he was.

So soon after that, Charlie came back to the Bay Area from New York, and at that time, a full-time position opened up at San Francisco State. So I had to make a choice whether to stay on full-time at Arts and Crafts or to go full-time to State. Being a state employee has its advantages, and, of course, Arts and Crafts at that time was still a hardscrabble school, and you never knew – the pay was lower than anybody else's, being a private school, and no benefits to speak of.

It wasn't very good in terms of job security. It was basically conceived at the beginning of the century as a place where established professionals would come and teach almost for nothing, just to be teaching and have contact with students. But they had careers going as painters, were showing and selling and so forth, independently well-off. Well, that isn't what America was about in the 1950s. These people depended on the salary they got from teaching to live, because they weren't selling much in the way of painting.

Of course, it was the same as it still is today. You have to go to New York. That's the only place to be. Either go to New York physically, or if you're going to stay out here on the West Coast and paint, you had to have a connection with New York somehow. Diebenkorn is a good example. He was showing at Poindexter at the time. Nate Oliveira was showing maybe at Staempfli [Gallery, New York City] or someplace. So it could be done.

So anyway, I took the job at State, which was a wise move, because now I've got health care paid for, and I get a pension.

MR. STIEBER: You're still reaping the benefits of that decision.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, yeah. So that was a good move, and later on, Bechtle made the same move for very much the same reasons. He was teaching at Arts and Crafts at that time. While I was teaching part-time, he was teaching full-time, in the design department there. He worked for Kaiser Graphics at the time, too, doing advertisement type work and logo design, stuff like that. I used to watch him when I was waiting around to go into the army. I had a few months after I graduated in January. The semester ended at the end of December or something, and I had to wait until April to go into the army.

So I hung out at Arts and Crafts and skimmed off some of the drawing classes. I'd look out the window in this upstairs studio, and I'd see Bob drawing up in his little MG, pretty balding up top then still, didn't have a beard at that time, I don't think. He had a moustache. No, I think he didn't have a moustache or a beard. He had this wool pea coat with the little wooden barrel buttons, and I used to think, gee, a pretty cool-looking guy. I noticed him, but I didn't know him.

And Bob married his wife, his first wife, when they got back. I guess they got married when they got back or something, and Bob kind of discovered realism, kind of let loose with his realist tendencies while he was in London, just before he came back to the States, painting things inside his hotel room. So through Charlie - Charlie had been a good friend of Bob's, and through Charlie, I met Bob in 1962 when I was just finishing at Mills.

MR. STIEBER: Charlie Gill?

MR. MCLEAN: Charlie Gill.

MR. STIEBER: Yeah.

MR. MCLEAN: So in '63, we were in the Berkeley Gallery, where - Bob and I were among the charter members of the Berkeley Gallery and - or was it '64 for the point I was trying to make? Anyway -

MR. STIEBER: You were talking about -

MR. MCLEAN: We'd become good friends in '60. So that's when, in '64, we had our - that's when Ian was born, and Max was Bob's first child, Bob and Nancy's.

MR. STIEBER: Bob Bechtle.

MR. MCLEAN: Bob Bechtle. Max was a year younger than my son. He was born the next year, and then when Caitlin was born in '67, Ann was born in '66. So Bob's two kids, their birth dates, are bracketed just inside our two kids.



MR. STIEBER: Right.

MR. MCLEAN: So basically, we had our kids more or less together, and they were kind of raised together. The two wives got along very well, Darlene and Nancy. Bob and I were hitting it off and all. We kind of raised our kids together, so really, part of our association revolved a lot around our two families.

MR. STIEBER: And neither of you was working with photos at that point just yet?

MR. MCLEAN: Bob had started working – Bob was like a couple or three years ahead of me on the photographs, I think. I was still battling my way through abstract art. I had a lot more baggage to get rid of than he did. He wasn't as committed to the kind of painting I was doing as I was. So he "found" himself two or three years before me, and to that extent, he's been kind of an influence, because I was able – we shared a studio for a while, too, always in close proximity to one another.

MR. STIEBER: What years were those?

MR. MCLEAN: Geez, Charlie and I rented the studio in downtown Oakland first, and that was in the fall of '67. And then Charlie moved out into an adjacent space. He installed a door through into another studio space. It was an old courtroom space that was right across from city hall. So it was a government building with shops and commercial enterprises on the street level.

[END CARD 3.]

MR. STIEBER: This is Jason Stieber interviewing Richard McLean at the artist's home in Castro Valley, California, on September 20, 2009, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is memory card number four.

So you were talking about sharing a studio space with Bob Bechtle.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah. I have a – I can't remember quite when it was that Charlie moved out into his own studio, because he was doing some spray painting and had to construct a booth and venting, and it would have been messy to stay in the same room.

We had a room that was – I think it was 40 feet; it seemed to me it was 40 or 50 feet long and 18 feet wide. And so I'm down here at 45 feet from Bechtle, and he's painting with his back to me, and I'm painting with my back to him. [Laughs.] [One thing that required a certain amount of cooperation was the music played in the studio while working. I'd usually be in the studio before Bob would arrive, and I would have the radio tuned to the jazz station. When Bob would show up, he preferred classical, so I'd oblige him with a station change. But since I also loved classical, no problem.]

But it was a good studio space. And I pulled out when I built my studio up in Oakland Hills. I had it designed and built in '74. So Charlie and I took over the studio in '67. So '68, '69, '70, '71, '72, '73. Geez, six or seven years?

MR. STIEBER: That you shared the space with –

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, first with Charlie, then with Bob, maybe; I don't know, three years with Bechtle, something like that. I'm not quite sure what dates. But, you know, that was pretty close when you're working in the same studio with another artist. I was ready to have my own space, as was Bob.

I would hear from various people indiscreet complaints to me about how they felt about Bob's painting, and some of it was kind of negative. It was like, the color's too bland; it's so washed out, kind of pastel-ish, and a little trouble with the iconography, the subject matter, as well. It was just too – actually, it was too much about what he's now famous for.

MR. STIEBER: Right.

MR. MCLEAN: I mean, it was too banal, and nobody could stomach that banality. But I kept looking at it, and I could see – I could see what people meant by certain attributes that they picked up on in the painting, but there was something there that was still mysterious. There was something that I was compelled to defend, and I think – I don't know what degree or how direct it was, but there had to be some kind of an influence there.

But it made me move from, say, in '67 when I did the first horse painting, when I was collaging from various printed source – print sources from – I had the scraps from National Geographic, and I remember a thing they did in Kern County [CA] with all the fields of flowers that were growing – wildflowers.

I used them as a backdrop for drawing on this horse, which was all – I shot with a camera over in Mill Valley, in Marin County. John Ihle was a weekend cowboy, and he had a horse out there. I said, why don't you settle

down? I want to take a picture of you. I guess I took that picture, but I didn't know much at all about photography.

I hadn't taken any - I wasn't adept at photography at all, and it wasn't until after 1972, which is when I quit working from other people's stuff. But that one, I did work from photographs that I took of John. I just don't remember the circumstances at all about taking my first picture of a subject that I then painted.

I painted the horse and him, but as with the painting that I showed you in the magazine there, all the rest of it was fiction, collaged around the subject. And as time went on - and maybe Bob's influence was apparent there. I'd always been amazed that he would take reality at face value. And he took it all the way out to the edge, the edge of the canvas, I mean.

I mean, everybody, you know, people like Peter Phillips - Peter Blake, the British Pop painters. You know, that kind of razzle-dazzle kind of toying with reality, but not willing to completely surrender to it.

So I would use art gimmicks, as I call them, border affectations and whatnot, to validate the picture as art. And in a somewhat more deadpan way, Malcolm Morley was doing the same thing back in New York.

But he used a kind of an off-white or white border with rounded edges, looked like a - well, somewhat rounded. Maybe mine were rounded, and his were absolutely sharp corners - [laughs] - but he wanted there to be a space between the picture and outside reality, which, as a frame does, gives extra emphasis to the fact that you're looking at a picture of a picture - the picture is the subject, not the scene depicted.

Gradually, I got rid of my borders and the artsy stuff, the gimmicks, and I was painting all the way to the edge, too.

And so it's a different way of thinking about imagery, and being able to let go of certain baggage that I'd been carrying around, and realizing that the painting had a legitimacy as a straightforward depiction. And it didn't need the window dressing of art.

MR. STIEBER: Did that transformation coincide with your use of your own photographs?

MR. MCLEAN: No, by that time - I had a show in 1968. Actually, on election night, when Nixon was elected president.

MR. STIEBER: [Laughs] Where was that?

MR. MCLEAN: At the Berkeley Gallery in San Francisco. In fact, we had popcorn at the gallery, and we had TV sets set up, you know, so people could go in the back room and see how the election was turning out. The attitude I had to accept was, well, if what you see on TV is too depressing, go out in the gallery and look at some cheerful images, you know? Nothing depressing about a well painted horse, right?

So we just made the best of a mix-up on the scheduling. Nobody thought about it being election night. I was very nonpolitical in those days. I did vote, though. I thought it was the night of the opening. Anyway, an unfortunate coincidence.

So by that time, I had totally finished with, you know, pictures that were essentially like this, not as well painted, not as well crafted as these are. But I was in transition from the gestural affections of abstraction toward a more exacting realism. But by late 1968, I had purged my work of all the stagecraft, borders, and other gimmicks that I felt was necessary to qualify them as art.

In 1972, we took our first trip to Europe, and I bought a Canon 35-mm single lens reflex [camera]. I had to have a camera. And the clerk at the camera shop told me how to use it, how to load it, how to unload it, and by the time I left the store I was confident - at least a little - that I could document this trip.

We were going to be going to Belgium, Germany, France, England, Scotland, Wales, the whole thing. So I went over there and just hoped for the best, and all I knew about working my camera was to get the needle to drop into the circle and then punch the button. [Laughs.] And I still don't know much about photography other than that.

MR. STIEBER: Do you still use that same camera?

MR. MCLEAN: No, I have a Nikon now. It has a few more bells and whistles. It automatically computes the light and aperture ratio, whereas this one, you had to kind of set the ring by hand. A little more mechanical. There are no computer elements in the Canon. So the Nikon's a little better but still not so high-tech that I couldn't use it. I have a total disconnect with modern technology, anyway. I don't know how to turn a computer on or off. Darlene does all that.

So anyway, I got the film back after we got back home, and amazingly, they all came out great. I mean, I said, Jesus, is that all it takes to – you know, it's no problem. So I still had some stuff set aside that I had planned for painting – from print sources. I ran across a real bonanza, a painter named Jerry Gooch. Nobody knows what happened to him.

In 1966, late '65-early '66, because the show happened in '66 at the San Francisco Art Institute. In those days, you had what was called the Artists' Committee of the San Francisco Art Institute. And they were – you didn't have to belong to the Institute to be on their Artists' Committee, but you just had to be respected by your peers and be inducted into the group. It was sort of cliquish.

And Roy de Forest was in charge of – well, it was the charge of the whole committee to decide what exhibitions were going to happen in the next year. They planned the exhibition calendar. And Roy came up with this idea – and this is '66 – which I credit as being the first Photorealist show in the country.

He says, you know, he says, there's several painters over in the East Bay that work from photographs, get their images from photographs. And, well, I think it'd be kind of interesting to have a show of those guys. We could call it "East Bay Realists." This is a working title only.

We can always change it later on, because nobody could think – everybody was confused – realists? I mean, Goya was a realist, and what about the realism of – some would say, name various artists who you can interpret as realists. But they were realists not so much in terms of style, certainly not from photographs, because it all predated photographs. So, well, we would change the title later. Well, it never got changed; it stuck.

And so we had Charlie Gill, me, Bob Bechtle, and Jerry Gooch, I think, were the four artists in that show. So that was the first – I think the first – Photorealist show in the country. Maybe not so stylistically pure as it later became, but still –

MR. STIEBER: This was suggested by Roy De Forest?

MR. MCLEAN: Roy De Forest, yeah. And so it went – I think we got a review in the [San Francisco] Chronicle or something like that; that was it.

But as I say, by '72, I'd gone to Europe and taken those pictures that came out so well. I then had confidence that I could take a photograph. I could take 35-mm slides of my own original subjects, all the better to control composition and other formal concerns.

And I was already using – for the collages and stuff that I would project under glass, I would do it with an old opaque projector. So this allowed me to use the slide projector. And so the first painting I did was – I think it's in the Smithsonian right now.

MR. STIEBER: The Speiser Collection [The Stuart M. Speiser Photo-Realist Collection]?

MR. MCLEAN: Speiser Collection, yeah.

MR. STIEBER: Yeah.

MR. MCLEAN: Well, you know the story of the Speiser Collection. Every painting had to have an airplane theme in it somehow. And so I couldn't figure out what the hell do you do with racehorses, horses of any kind, and airplanes? They don't go together. [Laughs.]

With Ralph Goings, yeah, okay, Cessna parked out in front of an airplane hanger – no big deal – pickup trucks and – it seemed natural for some of the other guys, but I couldn't figure out how to do it. So I was flying down to Washington, D.C., from New York at the opening of the – what was it – the collection that the National Gallery [of Art] was showcasing, private collection, had some realism in it. Bought some of my things at OK Harris.

We were going down for a formal dinner there that was held at the opening of the show. And Lou was asking me, he says, what'd you come up with regarding the Speiser thing? I mean, have you thought of anything? I said, geez, I don't know.

MR. STIEBER: This is Lou [Louis] Meisel.

MR. MCLEAN: I mean, I don't know. Yeah, Lou Meisel. I said, it's really hard. I don't know. Maybe I'll have – maybe a kid, maybe my kid, or somebody build a model airplane or something, you know, add a horse in there or something. He's – I just was trying to get rid of him. I didn't want to get into the conversation. I just sort of – [inaudible]. He says, that's brilliant! That's great! That idea is fantastic.

MR. STIEBER: [Laughs] You're good at impressions.

MR. MCLEAN: He thought it was great. So I got to thinking about it later, after I got home, and I said, you know - started putting it together in my head. And I knew that Ralph - he was living in Sacramento at the time - I knew his daughter had a horse. She kept it at a stable nearby. And I thought, well, you know, where am I going to get a model? Well, I ask Dennis Beal, a colleague of mine out at San Francisco State, and Dennis, he says, yeah, there's a hobby shop there in San Rafael that you might be able to borrow a model from, or something like that.

And I said, I don't want a fancy plane that looks like - it's got to be like one of Bob's cars. He doesn't paint a classic - well, other than that T-Bird he painted with his brother, that the university has, in Berkeley. But it's always a '67 Pontiac or some generic car, you know - he doesn't want to call attention to the thing. So I says, it's got to be an airplane airplane. It's just a plain old generic plane, you know, fuselage and a wing. And so I went over to this little hobby shop, because we were going up to Sacramento to visit Ralph, and the guy had a model in there, balsa wood model, with red tissue paper cladding. And I said, yeah, this is perfect. It's about - wingspan about like that. This is going to be perfect.

So I went up there, got Cameron; she got her horse out, sat on the horse. Had a nice barn situation behind her: the stables, nice red, black, interior behind her, and the horse, and I had my son, Ian, and Kevin, Ralph's youngest son, hold the model, just sort of casually, down at the side, you know. It looks like some kids out having fun as kids. It was a perfect shot, and I snapped it, and that was Sacramento Glider [1973].

MR. STIEBER: But that wasn't the first painting you did with your own photo.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah.

MR. STIEBER: That was your first - okay.

MR. MCLEAN: That was my first one.

MR. STIEBER: Okay.

MR. MCLEAN: And all the shots turned out well, just like the European shots. And from then on, I was off to the horse shows. And I would never work from a print reproduction again, from a magazine or anything else.

MR. STIEBER: Right. Let's talk a little bit about why horses.

MR. MCLEAN: Oh, I mentioned, by the way, Gooch, at the beginning, there, and we mentioned him about Roy De Forest on a tricycle.

But Jerry was courting a student of mine in my drawing classes, at Arts and Crafts. And it turns out that she - her mother was, like, a Bay Area distributor of horse breed magazines: monthly - [inaudible] - the Arabian Horse, Quarter Horse Journal, all these various publications. And she had back issues stacked on shelves and things, and I went down there to look in this kind of warehouse, and she says, yeah, you can have any of those back issues you want.

I came out of there - [laughs] - with loads of magazines. I'd just pore through them. I said, wow, there's a painting. There's a million-dollar painting, right there. And that was my source. I took out subscriptions to these same magazines later on, and I would be getting them for several years, until I made that change in '72, when I started going to the horse shows.

Well, actually, I kept my subscriptions to the magazines, because in the back of them, they would have a little section called "Coming Events." And they'd tell you where the next horse shows of that type of breed were going to occur. And so I'd mark them off - the ones within driving distance of the Bay Area, that is.

But I've also gone to Phoenix; I've gone to Santa Barbara - quite a ways away - to attend large horse shows. They give you a lot of material. And I just haunt the aisles between the stables - up and down, up and down, all around the grounds, just hoping for a target of opportunity. And sometimes I'd strike out; sometimes I'd get some masterpieces. For the most part, I'd try to avoid the owners because they get very self-conscious and want to pose the horse, ruining the whole effect I'm trying to achieve.

So I would always try to catch the horse when it's alone and waiting to be either put away or saddled up and readied for another event. So I had several main venues that I would go to, and I would get all my materials from there.

MR. STIEBER: There, you mentioned about people. There are a lot of people in some of your paintings, more so than in most other ones. Is that just because it's horses?

MR. MCLEAN: Well, yeah. I kind of, I broke it down once into maybe like three categories. The painting in here,

Spring Doe [1975], that's another one with a girl on; it's the one behind you there, with the appaloosa, white appaloosa, and the girl in red. The first ones had people, lot of people in them, with a horse. And that's when people were, if they were saying anything at all about the paintings, they would talk about - remember Gregory Babcock, before he got killed, said something about, that I make these acidic, these kind of - what'd we call it? Not acid -

MR. STIEBER: Acerbic?

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah. Not harsh, either, necessarily, but just kind gently satirizing them. Of the people that groom these animals, keep them, and own them, and show them, there's kind of a social commentary, as much as it is directed at the people more than to the horse itself. And that was true during the '70s, basically.

Well, I mean, it wasn't necessarily true. In fact, I did some with people with no horses, like Wishing Well Bridge [1972] in [Las] Vegas, you know, which was of a contest for rodeo queen or something like that. But you could tell it was a horsey-type picture, because all the girls have cowboy hats and Western gear. And then in the next phase - and by the way, this is all in the other room there - Satin Doll [1978] was sort of the tail end of that.

And then there was the, I think, a change, in that I - it's true that there - a lot of commentators saw some humor in these works. They were - I think Babcock, or one of the early critics, said that they were actually funny. I mean, these people, the way Babcock read them, were these ridiculous trophy-hunting folks who were kind of absurd figures in our society. But I never thought of them that way. You don't really think about the social status of the people that you're painting, particularly - I just liked it because you had a great blue suit on this girl that looked terrific against the white horse or whatever; as I say, thinking of it formalistically, the way a painter might look at it, [James McNeill] Whistler comes to mind, rather than some kind of social commentator.

So then - I think as time went on, I got more sympathetic to the horse carrying the entire load. And it became even more formalistic, in the sense of that - well, you know, Kahlua Lark [1980] is a good example, right there, with a red background. You've got the dog on the right, and you've got the folding chair on the left. I was very careful to make sure that folding chair was in there, although the Japanese cropped it a little bit too much on the left side. The outside leg of the chair barely kisses the edge of the image in the painting. But in the poster, it disappears outside the edge, due to sloppy cropping. Very important lapse.

MR. STIEBER: Just for the sake of the recording, we're talking about a Japanese poster.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah.

MR. STIEBER: Reproduction of a work.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah. "American Realism: The Precise Image," I think, was 1980 or 19 - what was it? [Isetan Museum of Art, Tokyo; traveling exhibition in Japan.]

MR. STIEBER: Eighty-five.

MR. MCLEAN: Nineteen eighty-five, yeah. But these things, when they're - the slide is corrected for the painting, and it's cropped. I'll move some things around a bit; sometimes I'll add a tree or take something out. I'll shift certain things around, to a limited extent, just to strengthen the formalism of the image. And so the light and the shadow and the horse being half in, half out - and all that becomes more interesting than anything else, and people just kind of get in the way. I mean, it's the social element I'm not particularly interested in, so why complicate the issue?

MR. STIEBER: But people also draw the eye, so - they draw the eye of the viewer.

MR. MCLEAN: Oh, yeah, yeah.

MR. STIEBER: Away from what is ultimately your subject.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah. I began to introduce trailers in there, too, which were often more interesting than the stables. I would come along and see - like that, that appaloosa over there, on the French poster. The horse almost gets lost in all the mélange of elements around it: the open equipment door on the trailer and all that. It wasn't put together. The background of the mountains and the rodeo grounds, that sort of thing, the empty rodeo grounds, from up around Winnemucca, Nevada, and the horse and trailer proper came from out here in Stockton at a horse show.

So sometimes I mix and match. But always for the good of the painting. And so it's gotten - I'm still - at one point, I quit painting the horses in the horse show settings. I decided to paint them in their natural environment, out in pastures and the like, just to see if and how they would function in a more low-key, irony-free environment.

And they totally went to sleep. I mean, these pictures just did not work. In a couple - three - instances, they worked. But it was so difficult. It's like - they looked like pictures for a calendar. It was just too soft, too pastoral, too sentimental.

And out of that experience I discovered that the horse, for me, anyway, has to operate within an essentially artificial environment. It's got to have that irony in there. And to that extent, I rely upon the people looking at the horse, at these pictures, to think of the horse in terms of its traditional beauty, its perfection. You know, it is the most noble animal in our civilization. I guess there are such things as pet goats and -

MR. STIEBER: [Laughs] Ralph told me you hate horses. [Laughs.]

MR. MCLEAN: Well, that's a bit harsh. I mean, I'm just indifferent to horses. I don't care for them one way or the other. I wouldn't own one if somebody gave it to me. They're a lot of work, and I don't think they're particularly bright animals.

I mean, the horse has to look good - he's got to have good confirmation; he's got to have something beautiful about him. And then you play him off against all this plastic ugliness and utilitarian stuff. And that was illustrated to me some years ago by a guy named David Ellis, who lived on Long Island.

MR. STIEBER: An artist?

MR. MCLEAN: No, no. He was a businessman in New York. Dealt real estate in Manhattan. I think his big preoccupation at the time I did the thing for him was cocaine. [Laughs.] He was married to an Indian - an East Indian woman, and they had a household staff and everything, a big mansion out there. And he flew both of us back, put us up -

MR. STIEBER: Even Darlene?

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah. He put us up at the place, his place. It took him a long time to come around to having me paint a portrait of him and his polo pony because he was really put off by these plastic buckets and hoses and junk around the horses I painted. He thought it was ugly. And he got it exactly right.

MR. STIEBER: He wanted it -

MR. MCLEAN: That's where the irony is, that - it's that - I mean, by the way, I collected some quotes that are great. One by D. H. Lawrence, who said that man - speaking of the 20th century - man has lost the horse, and now man is lost. And of course, I interpret that as going far beyond the horse. It symbolizes man's basic disconnect with nature. He doesn't - [inaudible] - now.

Which brings up another quote, and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin; Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1962] had it, where she said - she's quoting somebody - at the beginning of the book, and said, "Events are in the saddle, and ride mankind." [Ralph Waldo Emerson]. We have lost the capacity to foresee and forestall events. He's right, whoever it was. I thought it was [Albert] Schweitzer. I'm not sure. But I checked it out some years later, and it seems to me it wasn't Schweitzer.

But the horse has become a hood ornament on an automobile. The Mustang. It has lost its utilitarian role in the modern world. And so it remains an ornament, basically. And so it's that effort that people make to somehow evoke the romance of the past, by dressing up in chaps and fancy cowboy gear and whatnot, and parading around a circle in an arena for a satin prize ribbon. There's something kind of tragic about that when you consider the role horses played in civilization throughout history. But it was inevitable, as well. It's very little - nobody uses the hot air balloon to get anywhere anymore. It's essentially a recreational toy.

MR. STIEBER: But there's also a visual element to your - to the reason that you - an aesthetic element to the reason that you select horses as your primary subject. The beauty of the horse, is that -

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah. There's no doubt. It's almost a given, that the horse is just a beautiful work of nature. It's a marvelous masterpiece of natural engineering. And nobody - how can you hate a horse? Nobody hates horses. They have all this going for them. They have the mystique; they have the history.

I think we may be exaggerating a little bit, unless you see your horse come in first at the Santa Anita [Race Track], but this thing about heart - you know, some horses have heart. But read the - or listen to Karen Taylor, the owner of [racehorse] Seattle Slew, Karen and Mickey Taylor. They had me paint Seattle Slew on commission. I went back to Kentucky, and we photographed the horse.

MR. STIEBER: When was this?

MR. MCLEAN: Oh, gosh. Eighty-seven, '88, something like that.

And she just thought I captured the soul of the horse – [inaudible]. I wouldn't want to be so cynical as to deny the sincerity of her feelings, but whatever soul is there, it's there in large measure courtesy of Kodak.

MR. STIEBER: And the human tendency to anthropomorphize.

MR. MCLEAN: This kind of touches on that thing that dogged early criticism of this style of painting: that it's soulless, that there's no passion there. They talk about Bechtle, although they regard it now as a virtue, his deadpan, nonemotional, noninvolved approach to the subject, and so on, which is the way all of us are that paint in this style.

And I never believed that. I believe that there is just as much passion involved in doing one of these things as de Kooning expressed in any of his paintings. It's just that the art-viewing public has come to interpret passion and personal involvement as having a certain look to it, the tormented paint surface, et cetera.

MR. STIEBER: Or a certain volume, you know. Certain amplitude.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah. That's like saying, if your studio floor isn't spattered with paint and the place isn't filthy, you're not really an artist. But I talked to Ralph about this, too. The passion is just redirected in other ways. It's – much as I would prefer not to think – maybe it's too much of a workaday thing. In Persia – Iran – at least the village workers, they just go according to the script, I suppose, but in doing a Persian rug, which is a lot like the way these are done, you just, you lock in for the long haul, one knot at a time.

And you don't – the challenge of a painting like this is being able to sustain the will to see it through to perfection during all those weeks and months it takes you to do it.

MR. STIEBER: Absolutely.

MR. MCLEAN: I finished a painting for a client of mine, a good friend of mine, in Hertfordshire, England. I've done two commissions for him. First one was four by six feet, and it had something – by my count, something like 1,100 terracotta tiles on the roof of this 18th-century stable barn roof. And we went over there – he flew us over, very generous guy. He used to work for Lloyds [of London, insurance company], then he went into business for himself for a while. But he lives on this wonderful corner of what's called the Brocket Estate, in England, up in Hertfordshire. It's an old family – goes back centuries.

MR. STIEBER: Did you say his name? I'm sorry.

MR. MCLEAN: I think it's Brocket, B-R-O-C-K – maybe two Ks – E-T, or something. I don't know.

MR. STIEBER: That's his family name?

MR. MCLEAN: No, no. That's not his family name. This is incidental, really – it doesn't really matter that much. But he, John, bought a portion of this that was given up to pay the taxes on the estate or something like that. So he owns a piece of it he calls Melbourne Stud.

MR. STIEBER: But what is John's surname?

MR. MCLEAN: Robson, R-O-B-S-O-N. And Tessa, his wife, has always ridden these hunter-jumpers. I don't know if she rides to hounds anymore – [laughs] – I think they've outlawed that nowadays. But I painted their first horse, named Aquarius, and I did a barnyard scene of the horse in profile.

And it was the most elaborate painting I've ever done. I mean, it just – I think maybe it still is even more elaborate than the subsequent larger painting. But it was a four-by-six. I went over and took the photographs, came back, did the painting, sent the painting to them. They hung it up in their kitchen. And then, a few years later, in 2005, he asked me to come over again, because he wanted me to paint her new horse. The other horse had died. So the new horse is a stallion named Ryan. He calls up on the phone. I pick it up in my studio. He says, we'd like to have a painting that's 10 foot, at least – I think he wanted a painting 11 feet wide. And I said, no. I'll never go over 10 foot two inches.

MR. STIEBER: [Laughs] Because it was that – a limitation of the dimensions of your studio?

MR. MCLEAN: I don't know.

MR. STIEBER: You just made up something.

MR. MCLEAN: Actually, no – I could have taken a wider painting than that, maybe, in my previous studio. Big studio. But it wound up being, by the time I computed it out and got the – put the image against the wall, and did the cropping and all that, and figured out how big – it came out to be 10 feet two inches by four feet. And

that's the biggest picture I ever painted.

MR. STIEBER: What's the title of that one?

MR. MCLEAN: That's called Hertfordshire Morning: Ryan's World [2006]. Corny. I just threw that out there, and John said, no, just call it Hertfordshire Morning. Then he said, wait a minute, Tessa said she wants Ryan's World. So I made a compromise where we just made the title longer.

MR. STIEBER: When was that completed?

MR. MCLEAN: That was completed in – seven months later, in 2006.

MR. STIEBER: Let's talk a little bit about your relationship with OK Harris and Ivan Karp. How did that start? I mean, you said you met him first at Castelli, so –

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah. Well, I didn't meet him. I just observed him. I just stood there, watched, left with Charlie, and went on out. Bob Bechtle had gone back to New York for some purpose, as I recall. This is right at the beginning, when Ivan was starting out with OK Harris, within a year, something like that. He was still putting together a stable. And he'd been interested in Bob's work, I think, ever since Bob showed work at the show Linda Nochlin put together at Vassar [College, Poughkeepsie, NY], I think, a realist show ["Realism Now." Vassar College Gallery, May 8-June 12, 1968]. And he wanted Bob in the gallery. So he had him in for an interview while he was back in New York.

And prior to – and Bob and I were sharing a studio at that time, and I felt my work was probably ready for New York. And Bob said, look, I'm going back; I got an interview scheduled with Ivan. And he didn't suggest this, but I sort of jumped onto it myself. I said, well, look, do you mind if I give you a few slides of my work? But don't push it. I said, just if you have an opportunity to show him these, go ahead and do it. He said, yeah, no problem.

So I gave him a selection of slides. He tucked them in his pocket, went back there, had an interview with Ivan. Ivan told him, yeah, I want you in the gallery. He said, by the way, you know any other artists out on the West Coast – [laughs] – that paint like this, that have this style? And Bob says, yeah, as a matter of fact – and reaches in his pocket, and he pulls out these slides, handing them to Ivan.

Ivan took the slides out, held them up to the light. And Bob says his first remark, he says, these are killers! These are killers! So he was taken immediately. And following on the heels of that meeting was the show Jim Monte and – what's her name – she ran the New Museum after she quit the Whitney [Museum of American Art, New York City], and died just recently.

MR. STIEBER: Oh, I just read her biography.

MR. MCLEAN: Gosh, I knew her name – yeah, Marcia Tucker. And they came out to the Bay Area and, of course, this was subsequent to the documenta [Kassel, Germany]. No, no. Before documenta. Yeah, before documenta. This was around 1970, is when they had the show at the Whitney called "22 Realists" [1970].

[END CARD 4.]

MR. STIEBER: This is Jason Stieber interviewing Richard McLean at the artist's home in Castro Valley, California, on September 20, 2009, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is memory card number five.

Okay, so you were talking about Marcia Tucker coming to –

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, and Jim Monte, who used to work in a gallery in San Francisco before he moved back to New York. And I think – I don't know quite how it happened, but I always had the feeling that both Marcia and Monty lost their positions at the Whitney over that show, to some extent. Maybe it was connected with other things that they weren't happy with or whatever. But I don't think the Whitney particularly wanted them to do that show; I don't know. But having to – just paranoid about the way the whole movement's been treated over the years.

MR. STIEBER: So she had a lot of personal problems with the director there, too.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah. It could be just chemistry problems between personalities, you know.

MR. STIEBER: But you're right. She was always sort of pushing the curatorial envelope, and, you know, if the management didn't want a show, then she absolutely wanted it to be there.



MR. MCLEAN: Oh, yeah. [Laughs.] Well, they came out and selected works from – now I don't know. I remember Harald Szeemann, who put "documenta 5" [1972] together; he was director of that. And he came to the studio, and I remember that visit and selecting – I can't remember – I remember Jim Monty and Marcia being out there, but I don't remember them selecting particular works.

MR. STIEBER: They came to OK Harris, or to your studio?

MR. MCLEAN: They came to my studio.

MR. STIEBER: Okay.

MR. MCLEAN: But anyway, I sent a painting – or maybe sent – no, I didn't know I was in OK Harris yet because Patterson Sims was working for Ivan at that time, and subsequently went to the Whitney, but at that time, he was working for Ivan at OK Harris. And he told me at the opening of the show. He said, by the way –

MR. STIEBER: The realist show at the Whitney?

MR. MCLEAN: The realist show at the Whitney. He says, of course you know you're in the gallery. I'm like, oh, yeah? I didn't. Nobody told me. So that's when I first heard about it. The Whitney bought a painting of mine out of that show, Still Life with Black Jockey [1969].

MR. STIEBER: What was the date of that show?

MR. MCLEAN: Nineteen-seventy – I think it was January. First time I'd ever seen Jasper Johns in person. I was standing over there in a crowd of people, Dick [Richard] Estes and Jack Beal and others. And Johns walked in, from across the gallery – on the opposite side of the gallery – and I directed a glance in his direction – a longer than prudent one – to verify if it was really him, I guess.

And he somehow made eye contact with me as he was walking, with his hands clasped behind his back or something like that, and looking at things on the wall. Wasn't looking at our show across the room; he was looking at something else. And he looked over at me, and he goes – [laughs] – like that – like, what are you looking at, you fool? And it was so embarrassing. I immediately looked away, of course, and went on with my chat. So much for hero worship.

Anyway, that show – a lot of camaraderie and everything there, too, and Jack Beal kind of presiding over everything, because he was basically saying, this show is the opening shot across the bow of the art world. New things are afoot, and we're bringing a kind of humanism back to art.

Well, you had two different kinds of realism operating there. You had what the Photorealists referred to as studio realists, like Jack and Al Leslie and people like that – the moralists.

MR. STIEBER: Who are painting from life and –

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, actually painting from life; not photographs. Then you had the Photorealists; these cool, deadpan atheists – [laughs] – over here on this side. But Jack was sort of seeing it all as one nice, big ecumenical mix. It was in the aggregate that it was going to revolutionize – bring humanist imagery back into legitimacy and so on.

So that show – that's when I learned that I was actually in the gallery. Bob and I were both there. In those days, we used to fly together a fair amount, especially going back to New York. There were things, events, like doing the realist portfolio for Bank Street Atelier [New York City], which was then taken to Kassel in Germany to be marketed at the same time "documenta 5" was on. In those days you almost had an entire 747 to yourself. You know, hardly anybody flying, but they were regulated airlines and – [laughs].

So anyway, that show was important in that sense. I mean, that was the debut of my work in New York. And then Sidney Janis had a show called "Sharp Focus Realism" [1972]. And of course, Robert Hughes and all these other people were just climbing the wall. They couldn't find enough rocks to throw at us. In their collective opinion it was just the most despicable example of opportunism and greed that you can imagine. Nothing less than a conspiracy launched by a cabal of desperate art dealers and artists to jump-start a flagging art market, which was absolutely not the case. You know, all these high-flown –

MR. STIEBER: That's what they said about –

MR. MCLEAN: – holier-than-thou critics. Yeah, they were saying things like that about it. But, you know, the photograph is the fly in the ointment. That's the thing that cannot be tolerated. All the 19th-century modernists fought against it and certainly avoided – except surreptitiously. We know about certain modernists that did use photographs, but they did not talk about it a lot.

But the camera was the big enemy. And probably a big reason for why abstraction – why it pushed art more into a kind of formalist thing that photography couldn't touch. Except the age of reproduction really kicked in, in earnest, in the 20th century. And you had people like me in the mid-20th century trapped into stylistic copying of photoreproductions in art magazines. [Laughs.] And that's one of the things that drove me to realism, was that I couldn't go on reinventing Dick Diebenkorn. I couldn't – he did it; he said it all. I mean, it was a dead end for painters like me. Those guys took it to where, you know –

MR. STIEBER: As far as it could go.

MR. MCLEAN: The furthest it could go. I remember Bob Arneson, sometime in the mid-'60s, at a dinner over at our place. And I took him downstairs to a little basement area that I had set up as a studio. And I had what I thought were some neat pictures going, with objects attached to the surfaces and collage elements glued on.

And he says, God. He says, I see Rauschenberg here. I see Johns. I see a little Jim Dine in here. But where are you? I don't see you anywhere in here. [Laughs.] He was always on my case about that. And he was an original himself, needless to say, and he tolerated nothing less in others.

So he was a kind of goad to me, spurring my growing dissatisfaction with action painting. So anyway, that's one of the reasons I quit. It became – all the tricks were known. And if you didn't know them, your teachers could teach them to you in an art school. It was the new dogma, you know, the new parameter for everything called "art."

MR. STIEBER: Right. Tell me about your first solo show at OK Harris.

MR. MCLEAN: That was in 1971. I had a show there with – I shared the gallery with Steve [Stephen] Posen. He was doing those wrapped wall construction things that he then painted. Yeah, it was – I sold everything out. Actually, I've sold every horse painting that I ever painted, except things I kept back for myself. I can't say that of late, but this will be the first horse painting in some years that I will have finished and put back out there. I just want to see what it will do.

I can still get excited by the painting – by what this painting offers in the way of – I don't know, there was a time, maybe a more innocent time, when artists were thought – I mean, the worst thing you could do is paint tomorrow a painting that looks like what you did today. I mean, everything – took me a while to realize that people aren't built that way.

I mean, people don't have that many good ideas. They don't have – they can't change and create a revolution every time the sun rises. I mean, it's impossible. It's this mythology that's kept alive by the critics who are just like most of the rest of the public. They crave novelty. They want to see something new and exciting every day. They don't want to eat the same meal twice. But for the guy who's painting the things –

Wayne Thiebaud said once – he described the trajectory of an artist's creative growth. You start out at a fairly steep incline, and you're staking out your territory and discovering what it is you can do and what you can say. But the satisfactions you get from it become more and more refined and subtle. And it kind of tapers off; it plateaus out at some point.

And, God, I wouldn't want to have [Giorgio] Morandi paint a painting different than he painted when he died. You know, I wouldn't want to see him change. I wouldn't want to hear Charlie Parker change. [Laughs.] I wouldn't want to hear Dizzy Gillespie change his style either, you know. I mean, those guys bring us a certain nugget of individual assertion, either in music or on canvas or whatever. But it's theirs. It's their signature thing.

I've done how many paintings and how many watercolors over the years? There's more people than that in the city of Oakland. I mean, I got a lot to cover, you know. [Laughs.] A lot of people don't have pictures of mine. And the fact that – it's a scarcity factor, too, you know, you do maybe two pictures a year, or something like that. So I just – it's an inward thing. The satisfactions I get that can keep me nailed to a canvas for a certain amount of time just happen to be territory that I've already charted and that I continue to exercise, because I continue to get a charge from what it tells me.

And I defy anyone – show me anybody else painting horses in this country. I mean, I own that subject, virtually own it. I mean, there's a lot of people who paint horses, but they're called western artists or live in Taos and Albuquerque and places like that. You know, they paint for – they have exhibitions and huge conventions that just deal with western art. And it's usually of the most nostalgic and sentimental type.

So I don't know, I've come to terms with my limitations. I say, okay, at 75, if I could turn out several more paintings that don't look any better than what I've already done, I figure that's a pretty good lifetime contribution. I really think that most artists, and even artists of note – to listen to the pundits, you'd think that

there are only a select few artists who somehow don't have the creative ability to create a revolution every morning.

Or God help the artist who has a show one year, and then two years later he comes out with a whole new gang of pictures that don't look anything like the other ones. Remember the old question that used to hang out in the '80s, you know: I wonder what the new [Frank] Stellas are going to look like? [Laughs.] The new Stellas. A lot of people have forgotten the old Stellas.

But I just think it's a limited thing. It's given to very few of us to come up with more than one good idea in a lifetime. If you look at the artists who are distinguished, they weren't all over the map. They weren't doing a different thing every day.

But I think [Andy] Warhol has a great thing to teach us in that sense. Although I see Warhol's work as a pretty consistent bag of stuff, too. What he said gave rise, I think, to the presumption that I think is pretty true now, that art and fashion are essentially married. I mean, it's pretty much the same thing, held together by a glue called commerce.

MR. STIEBER: Lucre. Filthy lucre. [Laughs.]

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah. Filthy lucre, right. This idea of stay with what you do because your dealer's telling you that change, and we all go down. Don't change. Ivan's never told me that. His attitude was, paint what you want.

Ivan's a pretty opinionated guy. But he believes passionately in having the conviction of your opinions, too. I remember sitting talking about music one time at a gallery in LA and we were in the backroom or something at an opening. And I made some remark about rock and roll, but then I demurred with the wimpy possibility that maybe it's just me. Maybe it's really - there's something there I'm missing.

Ivan jumped all over me. He says, no, why not have the balls to say it? It's lousy music. [Laughs.] It's noise. Describe it as it is. Don't make any excuses for it. But he's always been very direct. That's why he's so interesting to listen to. We've written some letters over the years.

MR. STIEBER: I hope you still have them.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, I still have them. Once in a while, we get involved in some - what's the word, contretemps or something - [laughs] - over price or something like that, percentage. I was always thinking that he wasn't asking enough for the pictures. And you know, he says, well, hey, Jewish gynecologists on Long Island don't buy horses. [Laughs.]

So, you know, he has - I guess he's probably indirectly - or he'll render an opinion about a particular painting. He'll say, that just - that won't get - you have a troublesome thing occurring in this picture. And I'll say, what? He says, well, you know, the piss pool under the horse's belly on the ground. This is a little bit troublesome. People turn the picture down. Well, I said, send it back; I'll paint it out. That's easy to do.

But in the broader philosophical sense, he's never really - he's more or less left it to you. You know, paint what you want to paint. Paint what you feel strongest about. But he is an extremely generous guy and has a strong family feel about his stable, about - if somebody quits the gallery, especially if it was somebody he values, it's a real blow to him. He takes it as a personal rebuke. It isn't just strictly a business relationship.

Some artists have quit, and they've gone back, and quit and gone back. I think Malcolm Morley was doing that when I first joined the gallery. He'd get all pissed off about something, and then he'd quit. And then the next day it would be patched up, and he'd come back in. When I had my first show there, Ivan said something about - and Malcolm was still in the gallery. It's the time he did the Durban racetrack with the X through it [Racetrack, 1970]. I went to his studio with Ivan; I actually saw him do that painting. He just finished putting the X on it.

And he didn't quite trust his action in doing that, because it was like spending days and days painting this crowd and then put a big X through it, you know - which he didn't do with a brush. It looks like it's done with a brush, but he applied paint on a strip of plastic. And then he laid the plastic on there and pulled it away. It's like appliqué - pull it away from the picture, it looks - you know, has a little "holidays" in it. But he was pacing back and forth, and just in a stew about, whether it was the right thing to do? I don't know. One of those tormented artists.

And I've always felt that - sometimes I'll have second thoughts after a painting is done. I say, well, it wasn't as good an idea as I thought it might be. But while I'm doing it - before I even start to paint, I check it out to make sure that this picture's worth doing, and it's perfect in every respect, before I even put a stroke of paint on a canvas. So it's all worked out, preplanned, which is another no-no amongst the romantics.

I call them romantics, but on the other hand, I'm no less romantic as a painter. As I say, it's just - it's other directed. It manifests itself in a different way than what people are used to. And again, all of us people - you have critics who cut their teeth on abstract painting and are reluctant to admit to any other kind of imagery, because it would be a betrayal of everything they've believed in and by which they define art. They'd have to go back and rewrite all their reviews. [Laughs.] I don't know. But they feel threatened somehow.

But I know that Lou Meisel - I mean, he puts together these shows. And I know that he's out there beating the drums and waving the flag for this movement. And he really works at it - which Ivan doesn't do. But then Ivan's basically retired, too. And I don't think the people - his son, Ethan - in charge - he doesn't see Photorealism as being the backbone of the gallery's strength, and not committed to it, particularly. The new, younger generation in the gallery now, too, are very good painters, particularly those that are of photo-oriented painters.

But Louis out there, in spite of all of his efforts, can't seem to breathe any life back into this thing. And I don't know if we'll ever see a second go-around. I don't believe that history necessarily repeats itself. Too many exceptions.

MR. STIEBER: Which of the painters at OK Harris now do you particularly like?

MR. MCLEAN: I don't really pay a lot of attention to the painters that are there now. It's like - I become more reclusive as time goes on - [laughs] - I just have my own concerns to think about. I don't even get over to San Francisco to the galleries and go to the openings like I used to. Randy Dudley - high respect for him.

And also - ah, I can't remember his name - paints Texas towns. Oh, yeah, Rod Penner. They're usually not very big paintings. But the meticulous - you can hardly tell them from a photograph. They're just absolutely masterful.

But I get those cards every time, three weeks or so; they send a packet of cards, who's showing. But the selection - the kind of work they show is all over the map. Very egalitarian. Ivan took criticism early on for running a kind of emporium of art, they called it. Instead of having a tight-knit stable of artists that reflected one particular point of view, sensibility, he is just all over the map. Well, Ivan is - what he's interested in is very expansive. You know, he's always clearly made - but again, I don't know how much he really controls things anymore, because he's 84 years old.

It's a little different - it's hard to - I wish there was more action, of course, like we all do. But I never know how much of the lack of action can be attributed to the gallery, the way it operates, or the art world, the way it operates. It's just that nobody's - I know this fall, I heard a knowledgeable person say that there'd be a lot of galleries that aren't going to open this fall. It's just, they're folding. Chelsea's drying up. Louis is out there on the hustings all the time. But he's got paintings of mine, that he acquired through divorces and at auction and whatnot, that he's had around for some years, and he can't move 'em.

So I don't know, I keep looking for people or things to blame, and I can't with any conviction really put the blame anywhere - and I've never been so vainglorious as to assume that I might not be the cause. In other words, maybe I need to appeal to those gynecologists on Long Island - [laughs] - a little more. Ivan has always insisted that horse pictures are hard to sell.

But they've never been really about horses to me. And that's a kind of contrarian view that maybe is dangerous to hold. I may be fooling myself. You know, when it really gets down to it, they are pictures of horses. But I would say, well, yeah, they're pictures of horses, but they're much more than that.

And it's the way I've described my use of photographs in these images, that while some artists take the photograph and - I said something about this in an interview in a magazine called Equine Images - it's about horses and all about horse art - so I get to share the pages with a lot of people. [Laughs.] But they put me in there for some reason, so I did an interview over the phone with the guy that was assigned to do my interview.

And I told him that I - that while some artists reference the photograph, they approach it obliquely. They kind of tip in, touch it, and then back off. And they eventually kind of go out around it; they circumvent its particulars but still use it. I look at it as aiming a bow and arrow at a target downrange. And between me and the target is the photograph.

And I try to shoot right through the middle of the photograph and hit the bull's-eye - which is called art - at the other end, without denying the photograph - or without, you know, circumventing or not downplaying the photograph. And so I described it as being - as taking that approach where the photograph is a given.

You can always tell when a painting or drawing is taken from a photograph. I mean, there's usually enough telltale signs around. But I want someone - and I've had people say this many times - gosh, it looks just like a photograph, but it's better than a photograph. There's something going on there that you can't just dismiss it as

a photograph. So that's always been my strategy. Don't leave anything out.

I've got a list of quotes that I keep – you know, wise sayings or observations – I had them up on a bulletin board for a while – [inaudible]. But a photographer – I think an expert on photography or a critic of photography – I forget who it was, the last name is Fraenkel – well, there's the Fraenkel gallery. It's a photographic gallery over in San Francisco, handles John Gutmann's work and other people. [Lee] Friedlander and all those folks. But I don't think it's that Fraenkel. There's another person named Fraenkel.

But anyway, he said something like, there is nothing so mysterious as a thing accurately described, which is a very profound thing to me. It just blows that whole thing out of the water, that philosophy that you've got to obscure reality somehow. You got to make it mysterious and elusive.

MR. STIEBER: Right. In order to make it interesting.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, to make it interesting. The idea that something is so visually apparent, is so – it's what we call the "thereness" of things. [Alain] Robbe-Grillet said something to that effect in one of his writings.

MR. STIEBER: I'm sorry – who?

MR. MCLEAN: Robbe-Grillet. Alain Robbe-Grillet. A French writer. Gosh, can't – I have to look up the spelling on his last name.

MR. STIEBER: That's all right. I'll find it.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, Robbe-Grillet. Very hot guy among the academics of the last 20 years or so. But he said – and I always have to paraphrase this, because it's too long to get accurately unless you pored over it and really memorized it – well, let me attempt it for you. I quoted this in reference to a painting I submitted to a show in Texas – Houston or someplace. And the art critic Donald Kuspit took me to task – actually took Robbe-Grillet to task more for saying it than for me quoting it. But I attached it as my statement to accompany my painting.

But he's basically saying that things in the world – objects – have an existence independent of whatever significance we might assign them. And that was Kuspit's argument; there's no such thing as a thing that isn't given value or significance by a human being – which goes back almost to the Berkeleyian [philosopher George Berkeley] question: If a tree falls in the forest, and there's nobody to hear it, does it make a noise?

Robbe-Grillet said that things have a reality to them, a presence that defies all descriptions attributed to it. That we take away all the descriptions, all the labels, and all that stuff – he says, the object will still exist, independent of your ego's attempts to place a value on it. Or meaning. Just hard, unalterable, defying its own meaning – or something like that. In other words, you know –

And I've found stuff on the beach. I used to keep objects around that – I didn't know where they came from or what they were; the sea had so transformed them that maybe it was made out of rubber originally or something – I don't know. But I couldn't make any associations with that and man's use of it or anything, you know. It just seemed to be there. It's just an interesting object, and its existence is no less real whether or not I exist.

And I have this kind of perverse fascination with this aspect of experience. And I even feel it when I go out to photograph. I'll be off in some dusty corner of a pasture with a fence post and some weeds – nothing of interest. It interests me because there is nothing of redeeming interest in it.

MR. STIEBER: Either positive or negative. There is – it's just there.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah, it's just there. And is it possible to, maybe through painting it, charge it with some kind of significance which it doesn't have? In a sense, that's what Bechtle does with his pictures, too. It's part of achieving a noticeable banality. Those of us who are – and I don't fall into this category too much because I don't think the horse is very banal; it's too charged with significance, if you will, human attributes and everything else.

But Bob tries to – I described it once as my taking a hot subject – to use a [Marshall] McLuhan term – a hot subject and trying to cool it down to where it can act on a more neutral level. Try to get people not to say, oh, what a beautiful horse; look at the way that he paints the veins in the legs, and all that. You know, as if the veins – [laughs] – who cares? Gives it a little more horseness, that's all. And Bob, he takes a cool, banal subject – '76 Pontiacs are not "hot" – and tries to heat it up, bring it up to art.

MR. STIEBER: It's interesting that you would say that. I actually find his work extraordinarily cool. Almost as if the meaningless of what's being depicted is sort of the point. You can take some comfort in that there's no malice. There's no life really, but there's also no –

MR. MCLEAN: Malevolence.

MR. STIEBER: - malevolence, yeah. It's just there.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah. Well, but, you know, his earlier work may have looked like that more than, I think, his later work.

MR. STIEBER: Yes.

MR. MCLEAN: His later work, he's even changed his painting technique. Like, he'll go into a sky and lay down a brushy loose red field first. And then go back over that with blue and let some of these pinks kind of pop through here and there. So in effect, he sort of livens it up. But, you know, that's true to an extent though; he livens the thing up as a painting, but what people missed in paintings like that - and as I say, particularly the earlier work - was some kind of human - definable human emotional involvement. It's there, but it's operating under another guise, another disguise.

He's painting it for the painting of it, as Ralph would say, too. He loves being able to recreate this thing, but to - in a sense, Ralph, maybe, is more in love with the subject and with the visual aspects of the subject. Whereas Bob is more interested in the painting, the overall effect of the painting as a composite statement. That derives from Diebenkorn's influence, too.

MR. STIEBER: Right, yeah. There is something sort of semiabstract about those early paintings by Bob.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah. Well, you know, as long as I've known him - and I don't know to what extent I've ever divulged anything of a really personal nature to him, but I certainly would not hesitate, because I'm just a natural jabbermouth - [laughs] - I mean, I'll discuss anything I'm -

Bob - as long as I've known him, I've never known anything intimate about him. He's never said, you know - although we've had - we fall into discussions very easily. We can not see each other for a year or so, and all of a sudden we're talking art or something over a drink in no time at all. We have an instant kind of connection that way. We used to go over after classes, when we were teaching together; it'd be about an hour or so; we'd go to the faculty lounge and have a glass of wine and sit right down and be talking about serious stuff.

But as far as his personal life goes, he's a closed book. Very private person. He never divulges anything. He doesn't admit to a weakness or any kind of a regret or anything like that. Some people wish for a little more "soul" in his pictures, but I'm not sure that it's a legitimate request, because I don't think the paintings are hurt by what other people think they are missing. [In fact, their very strength derives from his ability to keep his distance, emotionally, from his subject. Stendhal speculated that "It may be that men who are not susceptible to passion are those who feel the effect of beauty most."] You can think of too many painters that - where they let it all hang out in the painting process.

So how am I doing on this -

MR. STIEBER: Well, I think we're done. I think this has been wonderful.

MR. MCLEAN: Well, we've covered some aesthetics - [laughs] - and some theoretical things, some local gossip and -

MR. STIEBER: Some biography, too.

MR. MCLEAN: Yeah.

MR. STIEBER: Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated...April 24, 2010