



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Mary Frank, 2010
Jan. 10- Feb. 3

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a digitally recorded interview with Mary Frank on January 10, 11, and February 3, 2010. The interview took place at the artist's home and studio in New York, NY, and was conducted by Judith Richards for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Funding for this interview was provided by a grant from the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Mary Frank and Judith Richards have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Mary Frank on January 10, 2010, at 139 19th Street, New York City, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc one.

Mary, I'd like to start with your family background – your grandparents, as far back as you know – and come up to the point where and when you were when you were born, where your family lived.

MARY FRANK: Well, I was born in London. My mother was an American, and my father was British, and –

MS. RICHARDS: How did your mother come to be in London? Now, she was English.

MS. FRANK: No, she was American.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh. How did she end up there?

MS. FRANK: Well, she met my father in Paris. Maybe I was conceived there, although I was born in '33, and she lived in London 16 – I believe 16 years, until 1940; so what would that – I can't count – would that have been then?

MS. RICHARDS: Twenty-four?

MS. FRANK: In 1924. Yeah, I think that's right. Her parents were Russian Jewish immigrants here, and when the war [World War II] started, they wanted her to come here. And she could, because of them. She could leave England. Men couldn't leave. So I came on one of those refugee boats from England.

MS. RICHARDS: Your mother's family was Russian Jewish –

MS. FRANK: Russian Jewish born.

MS. RICHARDS: – and your father –

MS. FRANK: And my father's family was, I think, also either, you know, Russia, Poland – around that moving border.

MS. RICHARDS: What was your mother's family name?

MS. FRANK: Lockspeiser.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MS. FRANK: And she was a painter under that name.

MS. RICHARDS: And her first name?

MS. FRANK: Eleanor, but she didn't sign "Eleanor" because I think, very pointedly, she thought it was more difficult.

She painted all her life. She was a very serious painter. She was figurative first. She studied in Paris. Oh, with – I forget who – one of those, I think, sort of big schools. And then she became abstract later on.

And she showed with the Phoenix [Gallery]. It was one of those cooperative galleries that was first on 10th Street, then moved to 57th Street, and then moved to SoHo. I'll think of the name. And she was a ferocious worker. She had cancer for many, many years, and I think everybody realized her painting kept her alive. I think once when she was told she had so many years, or something, to live, she said, no; she said, "I'm not

finished – I'm not finished with my paintings."

But she had studied music first. She was going to be a pianist and/or a singer. She had singing lessons and a lot of piano lessons. My father was a musicologist and wrote about [Claude] Debussy a lot, also other people, and at one point I think he worked for – it was like something of the music department of the BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation]. I think he was not interested particularly in making money, and not very good at it. And my grandfather supported – to what degree, I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: Your grandfather Frank.

MS. FRANK: Frank is my married name.

MS. RICHARDS: I'm sorry, grandfather –

MS. FRANK: Weinstein, my mother's father in Brooklyn, Gregory Weinstein.

MS. RICHARDS: Weinstein.

MS. FRANK: Lockspeiser was my mother's married name. My father was Edward Lockspeiser, L-O-C-K-S-P-E-I-S-E-R.

So when my mother – Ellie [Eleanor] Munro writes about it, because she interviewed her. Do you know Ellie?

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. FRANK: In the book *Originals* [: American Women Artists. New York: Touchstone.,1979] – she interviewed me a lot in that book, but then she also spoke to – I had told her I thought she should speak to my mother. And mother told her the story, how she was, I think, walking in Paris, and she sees a piece of paper on the ground that says – she picked it up, and it says, "Draw me." If you made a drawing, then, I don't know, you got a lesson or something like that, and that's how she started. She switched from music to art. That's an odd story, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: She had never –

MS. FRANK: No.

MS. RICHARDS: – shown any previous interest or talent?

MS. FRANK: I don't think so. No, I don't really know. There's so much I don't know about my mother. I mean, I lived with my mother – I didn't live with my father after I was seven – but there's so much I don't know. I mean, I could have known much more.

MS. RICHARDS: You didn't have brothers or sisters?

MS. FRANK: No, no. So –

MS. RICHARDS: So both your mother's family and your father's family came from Russia. Both your parents were born in England?

MS. FRANK: No, no. My mother was born here.

MS. RICHARDS: I'm sorry.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, it's okay.

MS. RICHARDS: She was born here.

MS. FRANK: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: He was born there.

MS. FRANK: He was born in London, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And you were born in 1933.

MS. FRANK: In London.

MS. RICHARDS: And what were those early years – you said you came to New York in 1940, so the first seven years of your life, what were those like?

MS. FRANK: Well, it was that very weird English upbringing, which is, there was a nanny, who contacted me about eight years ago. I got a letter – somebody calls me from the Neuberger Museum [of Art, Purchase, NY]. Someone wrote a letter to me, and so they sent it on, and it was written by the grandson of my nanny.

Now, my nanny was not a beloved person to me. It was not like, oh, my nanny! It wasn't like that. It was so strange. But she was Scottish, and if it was not for the war, I was supposed to go, actually, with her to Scotland, way up in the north where she came from, and spend part of the summer with her.

But she was very young. She had come from this tiny village and come to London and got work as – you know, I don't think she ever took care of children before. It didn't seem that way – very strict. The one thing very nice: she must have sung me a lot of Scottish songs, because I knew a lot of Scottish songs. My mother sang to me, but I don't think my mother knew all those Scottish songs, and I really know a lot. I don't remember the words now, but I know all the melodies, and I know some of the words.

So this letter came, and it was so odd. She apparently had been talking about me a lot to – she has three daughters and some grandchildren, and she got the grandson, who is very good on the computer – she didn't know my married name. She couldn't have. She knew Lockspeiser, and I guess that is a very unusual name, but I guess on the computer you can find everything.

They found a catalogue from the Neuberger Museum. I have had two, sort of, very big shows at the Neuberger – there was a lot of time in between – one mainly sculpture and prints, and the other paintings, more recently.

And so that's how she got ahold of me, and I have talked to her numerous times, including when she was very, very sick. It seemed like she was dying. She's 90-something now. She was probably about 18 then, right? And she wasn't fun. I remember my cat died, and she said, "Stiff upper lip." You know, the cat died from eating rat poison or something. What a thing to say to a little child.

But she had this – people have that, right? And with time, people become angelized, or sanctified. She was always talking to her grown daughters about me and how wonderful I was and good to her, and so that's why she bothered to get her grandson to look me up. So I've written her, and we talk sometimes.

And one time I said to – I said, what I really remember is a lot of Scottish songs. You must have sung them to me. And she said, oh, yes; oh, I did. [Laughs.] So I said, why don't you sing one with me now on the telephone? And she said, oh, no, I don't have a voice anymore, Mary. I said, sure you do. And then we sang, Will Ye No Come Back Again. Do you know that song? That's like the Bobby Burns – Robert Burns – song. And it's a song that people sing at the end of a party or something where people get together –

MS. RICHARDS: I'm sure I've heard it, but I don't know it by name.

MS. FRANK: [Sings] "Will Ye No Come Back Again." So it's a very pretty song.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, I didn't ask you what her name was.

MS. FRANK: Jessie.

MS. RICHARDS: J-E-S-S-I-E?

MS. FRANK: I think so.

MS. RICHARDS: And her last name?

MS. FRANK: Longbottom. Well, now, I don't know if Longbottom was her married name, because she was married and her husband died. When the war came, she told me – I didn't know anything, of course – she went to work in a munitions factory. And she did keep up some correspondence with my mother. She liked my mother very much, and she liked my father too, but particularly my mother. And so she did send me some letters that my mother had written to her about listening to the radio and Hitler and, you know, war.

MS. RICHARDS: What part of London did you live in?

MS. FRANK: Huh, I'm not really sure. I never – I've been to London a few times. I don't know London well, which seems really a shame, and I know it's Christchurch Road, so that could be looked up, because there was Christchurch Church down the street.

And there was a garden. It was a very small house; two floors, I think, but little, you know, narrow, but I do remember the garden. I remember playing in the garden. I remember putting doll clothes on my cat, and the cat ran up the tree and stayed there, of course, tearing all the clothes off.

I remember once gardening with my father, putting in tulips, maybe. It was a very big garden. I garden a lot, and I think about gardens a lot, not just flowers or not just vegetables, but the whole phenomenon of growth and soil. I've had four peach trees come out of compost. They were from pits that were probably from North Carolina peaches. So instead of getting ripe as they would in North Carolina in July, they got ripe in the Catskills [upstate New York] in the end of October.

MS. RICHARDS: They needed more time.

MS. FRANK: Yes, but they actually make quite good peaches, amazingly. At first I didn't even know what a peach tree looked like, as -

MS. RICHARDS: Are you a self-taught gardener, or did your mother or father lay the -

MS. FRANK: My father must have gardened a lot, but I didn't know that. I mean, I didn't have any experience, but I think he did. And my mother gardened. She didn't start early, gardening, but she did garden, and she loved it. But self - isn't everybody self - no, they're not. I mean, you learn from everybody, right?

MS. RICHARDS: When you were a little child then in London, were you starting to do artwork? Did you show any kind of precocious interest or talent?

MS. FRANK: See, I don't really know that. I know I made drawings. And when the war came, then the children were taken out of the cities, you know. They were evacuated. So that was very rough. I moved to four or five schools in a very short period of time. The war started in '39 in the fall - is that right? Something like that. I think so.

MS. RICHARDS: It started there a different time than it started here, of course, so -

MS. FRANK: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, no, I know it was '39 because the Germans went into Poland in '39. But I don't know exactly when the children were evacuated. They were evacuated out of all the cities. I mean, I should see the books on it and the movies - but I've never seen any; I know there are supposed to be some that are good - because it was a phenomenal thing to do.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you purposely avoided them, the books and the movies?

MS. FRANK: I didn't think so, but anyhow, I would be interested now. I probably was - it was very - nobody told me anything. I didn't understand anything - anything. And I wasn't talked to as a child, so that's one thing. I did hear Hitler on the radio because - I never would have. What I started to say and got way sidetracked was that I had that upbringing - and that's where the nanny came in - that the child is over there with the nanny, not with the family. They don't eat with the family, don't - you don't know what I'm talking about, that kind of English -

MS. RICHARDS: I've heard of it.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, yeah, and it wasn't upper class. It wasn't working class either, but it was - I wasn't a planned child. I suspect my parents were not - you know, my mother became pregnant, and I think she really did love me very much. My father is a whole other subject. But I think everything was really dedicated to work.

MS. RICHARDS: Your mother worked at home?

MS. FRANK: See, I don't remember her working at home, but she must have, but I don't know where. That's odd, because I know she did. I don't quite get that. She didn't have a studio somewhere else, so she must have worked somewhere at home.

MS. RICHARDS: Was your father supportive of your mother's artwork, aspirations?

MS. FRANK: I sort of think so. He was very interested in art. He wrote a book - it's an interesting book. I didn't read it until fairly recently because I didn't even have it - called *Music and Painting* [Edward Lockspeiser. London: Harper and Row, 1973]. And it was very hard, because there are thousands and thousands of books on music and poetry, music and dance, music and writing, music and - and there are hardly any on music and painting. And his book starts with - before [J.M.W.] Turner and goes up, I guess, through Impressionists. And then Debussy, [Gabriel] Fauré, all those.

MS. RICHARDS: Did he have an academic appointment?

MS. FRANK: He may have taught at some time, but I don't think mainly, you know - see, I had no idea - I mean, during the war, because, for whatever reason, he was not put into the army, but he was put into the fire service, which was probably at least as bad, because he was, I think, a very unathletic person - very. I mean, he walked,

himself, in the country and walked in the city, but he didn't, you know – and so, to be going up, you know, 70-foot ladders on burning buildings – and I did hear he had some kind of breakdown, I think, maybe connected to that.

But I know very little. And I also know that, at one point, I think he either considered – what do you call becoming Catholic?

MS. RICHARDS: Converting?

MS. FRANK: Converting, and then either didn't or did and, you know, dropped it, but that's – it's so vague. And –

MS. RICHARDS: He was obviously a nonpracticing Jew.

MS. FRANK: Jew, yes, very nonpracticing.

MS. RICHARDS: Although – yeah.

MS. FRANK: Very. I mean, he was –

MS. RICHARDS: "Lockspeiser" sounds like it's more German than Russian.

MS. FRANK: Yes, but lots of – my grandfather had a German name, too – Weinstein. Lots of them had German names. I don't know quite why. I think it's a lot – it's borders.

But – where are we? Once there was a Succoth, the Jewish holiday, right, with vines and things on a roof somewhere, and I was taken to that. It's the only thing ever – I was never in a synagogue. I never even heard about a synagogue. I think I knew I was Jewish, and when they evacuated the children, all the schools I went to were Episcopal schools; then I certainly knew I wasn't Episcopal.

And we sat in an air-raid shelter underground – under a rose garden, actually, in gas masks, facing each other – two rows. Gas masks were like the ugliest masks in the world. They really are. And we were there saying prayers in the masks, which you couldn't understand or hear. And I don't know if we went down every night, but we went down a lot in one school. And I tried to run away from one of the schools, unsuccessfully.

MS. RICHARDS: At six years old, I guess?

MS. FRANK: Hmm, maybe seven. Well, I had no idea, anything, what was going on. I think my parents visited me once in one of the schools, I mean, although it wasn't – you know, they couldn't, or whatever.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. And then at one point in 1940 – late '40 – you –

MS. FRANK: June.

MS. RICHARDS: – June, you left England, you and your mother, because the men couldn't leave.

MS. FRANK: No. And that was, I think, one of the last ships, because I think after that –

MS. RICHARDS: And the reason you were able to is because your grandparents –

MS. FRANK: Yes, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: – were U.S. citizens.

MS. FRANK: Yes. And what I heard, which doesn't really make any particular sense – and one of the good things, probably, about me doing this with you is I will try to find out some things which I can – where was I? Coming here – we went to South Hampton [England]. At the train station, when we landed there, my mother had this big, you know, wardrobe trunk, and the whole thing exploded. The hinges were gone. All these clothes and stuff. It got sort of tied together again.

And then we took a boat across the Irish Sea and landed in Dublin [Ireland]. Right. It's on the east coast. And I remember a very beautiful rose bush, and it said "Parnell," in bronze, in a small park. And then we got our train and went across Ireland to the other side, and everybody was saying how green Ireland is, how green Ireland is; it's so green, but actually it was June, and all the mustard was blooming, and it was really yellow. And I was thinking, why are they saying it's so green? I mean, it was also green, but there were these brilliant yellow fields.

And then the boat was full of women and children, a lot of babies – a lot of crying babies. And it was called the Roosevelt.

MS. RICHARDS: The Roosevelt?

MS. FRANK: I think it had been a transport ship for, I don't know, the navy or something. I mean, it was not a passenger ship, and they had made it into one. And it's true, there were no men. I mean, there were men on the crew.

And then everybody talked about icebergs all the time – icebergs and U [undersea]-boats – because it was June, and the icebergs were floating south, and everybody kept on saying, "If you see one, it's just the tip of the iceberg. It's just the tip. It's really, you know, 10 times bigger." And then south of the boat they said U-boats were moving north.

So that was what I remember. Endless conversation. And then we did – we didn't see a U-boat, which was good, but we did see an iceberg, and it was enormous, and everybody kept on saying, "It's just the tip." But it was – and I don't know how long it took. It certainly took over a week, but I don't know how long – maybe two weeks.

MS. RICHARDS: And you landed in Brooklyn [NY]?

MS. FRANK: Maybe like –

MS. RICHARDS: Or in Manhattan [NY]?

MS. FRANK: I think in Manhattan, and then went to Brooklyn, where my grandfather and grandmother lived. And –

MS. RICHARDS: What were their names? Weinstein, I know, but their first names.

MS. FRANK: Gregory Weinstein –

MS. RICHARDS: Sorry, what?

MS. FRANK: Gregory. He wrote a book called *The Ardent Eighties* [New York: International Press, 1928], meaning the 1880s. He was a printer, so he printed it and published it.

MS. RICHARDS: *The Ardent* –

MS. FRANK: Mm-hm [affirmative], referring to all the people who did, what do you call, like Greenwich House [settlement house] on the –

MS. RICHARDS: Arts and crafts?

MS. FRANK: Oh, no. Greenwich House is – well, originally was a place for immigrants to go to learn English, to learn everything. And –

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. FRANK: – there's still a number of them on the Lower East Side.

MS. RICHARDS: I know what you mean.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, and he included himself as one of the people – important people – of that time.

MS. RICHARDS: And you grandmother's name?

MS. FRANK: Eufgenia [Russian pronunciation], Eugenie.

MS. RICHARDS: So you went to live with them, right?

MS. FRANK: Mm-hm [affirmative].

MS. RICHARDS: And where in – that was in Brooklyn?

MS. FRANK: Flatbush, on East 21st Street, between Church – do you know Brooklyn?

MS. RICHARDS: Not much.

MS. FRANK: It's right in the – it was the center of Flatbush, and it was a block away from Erasmus High School, where my aunt taught French – I had two aunts living there – two unmarried aunts.

MS. RICHARDS: Their names?

MS. FRANK: Florence Weinstein, who became a painter later.

MS. RICHARDS: What was her first name?

MS. FRANK: Florence Weinstein. And she showed at the same gallery that my mother showed. It was a Greek name.

MS. RICHARDS: Is it Phoenix?

MS. FRANK: Phoenix.

MS. RICHARDS: I think I read about that.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, Phoenix. Good. And her younger sister - my mother's younger sister, Sylvia. And she died of - she was a potter. She was really a very interesting potter. She had also done a whole book on regional costumes of France, every [inaudible] whatever the word for state is. And she had a good sense of humor. I like her. She was somehow much more open. And she died of Hodgkin's [lymphoma], which my son had later.

MS. RICHARDS: So they all - you all lived in this one house.

MS. FRANK: One house -

MS. RICHARDS: Were there spaces also rented?

MS. FRANK: - there were three floors. No, no - and a small garden with two huge trees and two peony bushes. And across was the Dutch Reform Church, which is still there, and a cemetery. And I played in it with kids, in the cemetery. It was a nice place. And during the war, almost no traffic, because you couldn't get gasoline, and we [roller] skated - not on the gorgeous skates they have now, only public skates. You carried your key. That was sort of my religion, my skate key, right?

And we skated for miles. I think we skated all the way to Sheepshead Bay - we just kept on going.

MS. RICHARDS: What kind of student were you in - that was elementary school.

MS. FRANK: I went to several schools. My grandfather was very interested - maybe he was even on the board of education or something, in some way - and he really believed in public schools, public education, and my mother wanted me to be in private school.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that because she thought the public schools were not good enough?

MS. FRANK: I have to say, I have no idea why. I mean, it could be - could be - but maybe - maybe some other reason, I don't know. So I was in private school, public school, you know - [inaudible] friends.

[Cross talk.]

MS. RICHARDS: That must have been difficult to keep switching.

MS. FRANK: Yeah. Well, first of all, I had an English accent. And it's very interesting; an English accent now is generally sort of - depending on who's listening - curious, a little theatric, funny, whatever, but I don't think it's what it was then. This was pre-Beatles, right? Really pre-Beatles. And I know now how it sounded to kids then, just an ordinary English accent, not Cockney and not, you know, very high class. It sounded snotty. Do you know what I mean?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. FRANK: [Inaudible] I mean, it's just so unlike an American accent, and I think that was the take. So, of course, I was made fun of a lot, and I lost it really fast [inaudible].

MS. RICHARDS: But while you were going back and forth into all these schools, did you -

MS. FRANK: I don't think there were that many, but there were -

MS. RICHARDS: - were you a good student? Were you mostly interested in skating or in art or in reading or something else?

MS. FRANK: For one thing, I was not pressured academically. It's always interesting to me how many people I

know, of all different kinds, who are still, in their 70s, having dreams about tests that they failed in elementary or high school or college – I didn't go to college. I never had those dreams.

MS. RICHARDS: There's being pressured, and then there's being encouraged –

MS. FRANK: Yes, I was –

MS. RICHARDS: – because it was meaningful to your parents, but not to pressure you?

MS. FRANK: Yes. Well, my father now is out of it, not in this country, right?

MS. RICHARDS: Right. Your mother and your grandparents?

MS. FRANK: Yeah. I don't ever remember my grandfather – certainly not my grandmother. My grandmother was blind then. She had diabetes, and it wasn't – you know. My grandfather was, you know, learned in his own way. He was always reading. I think he was studying Spanish when he was in his 80s or something. He was always, you know, education, education, education.

MS. RICHARDS: Settlement houses. That's what you were trying to remember.

MS. FRANK: Settlement, yes. That's it. That's it, yeah. And he was very – he was an atheist and sort of fierce. I mean, he would have said he was Jewish, but he was very against organized religion, and he said – and I remember him saying to me that on his grave he wanted – he didn't want it written he was a good Jew; he wanted it written he was a good man. And he was quite active in ethical culture consequently, yeah.

And he had the first international press, I think, here. And it printed Chinese papers and Italian and also magazines and magazine books. And his son, my uncle, who I almost never saw, but he worked with him, and whose son – my grandfather's grandson –

MS. RICHARDS: Cousin?

MS. FRANK: My cousin – and I only have two living relatives. He's one here, and I have one in England. And he's a terrific person, Paul Weinstein.

And so that was three generations working at the international press. And what I remember is going there sometimes, and it was a very nice atmosphere. It was down on, you know, Varick [Street], where all of the printers are. And it was small. I mean, it didn't seem small to me, but I know it was very small; I don't know how many people [were] employed altogether.

And everybody had worked there for a very long time, and there were deaf people who did the typesetting. You know, that's a traditional line of work, you know, setting – well, not now; it's all digital, but it was. And what was very fascinating was I watched the newspapers being printed. So it was one big roller here and another roller here, and the whole press was maybe from here to there, not bigger than that, certainly.

And so, of course, one of the rollers had the ink on it. The other roller – well, I can't explain exactly, but what happened was that it went around sort of like – it seemed like a figure eight. And then, after it was printed, there was a row of gas flames the width of, say, the New York Times or whatever paper it would be, making hot air, right?

So the paper jumped – it leapt up over the flames and came down on a pallet, and came down exactly in the same place, each one. And each one, I thought, this time it's going to be burned. [Laughs.] There was all this big row of bright blue flames.

MS. RICHARDS: Magical.

MS. FRANK: Yes, it was very magical. And then those offset press guys – you know, one hand in, one hand out, and not to get caught in there. You know, this iron circle comes down. It was interesting.

MS. RICHARDS: So when you got to finish elementary school, was there a junior high school, or did you go straight to a high school?

MS. FRANK: I went to [inaudible] –

[Cross talk.]

MS. RICHARDS: So that was a high school?

MS. FRANK: Well, first I went to Friends School, for I don't know how long.

MS. RICHARDS: The Quaker school, Friends.

MS. FRANK: Yes, in Brooklyn, maybe two years.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you like that school?

MS. FRANK: I liked some things. The music there was great. We sang. I liked that. And I did have one great teacher, who I realized later was probably a lesbian.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember her name?

MS. FRANK: Conrad.

MS. RICHARDS: Conrad – her last name?

MS. FRANK: Yes. See, if I was that kind of person, I would have looked her up, because she was a big influence on me. You know, I've never gone and done that. I don't know why. It's almost amazing.

MS. RICHARDS: How was she an influence?

MS. FRANK: Well, she was a very powerful teacher, very passionate. Not a good-looking woman in any way – I mean, just sort of thick and strong-looking and serious but, you know, not lovely in any way, but obviously passionate. And I remember many things. I did a project on the TVA, Tennessee Valley Authority, which I remember finding that very interesting.

But then one day she stood up in the class – now, this was after the war, after the bomb had been dropped, the nuclear energy – right? And she said, what's the most important act, or something – thing that's happened – I think she said, in this century. And that would have been – the war was over in '46 –

MS. RICHARDS: Forty-five.

MS. FRANK: Forty-five. So this was after that. So you know, nuclear energy, I don't know what came up – those kind of things. And she just stood there waiting, and nobody said, obviously, what she was thinking. And then she said, India has gained independence from Britain, okay – 300 years, 400 years, whatever it was. That had a very big effect on me, as it probably did on the other kids, too. I remember talking with them about it, but – I was just–

MS. RICHARDS: And she went on to explain why she felt that was the most important thing?

MS. FRANK: I don't know if she talked a lot – that was enough. It was – it seemed radical to me.

MS. RICHARDS: So she wasn't a music teacher.

MS. FRANK: No.

MS. RICHARDS: No. You said, though, that one of the most important experiences you had at Friends was the music.

MS. FRANK: The music there, singing – we sang on Fridays in, you know – what do you call it – meeting – meeting. We sang when we were lucky. Otherwise we would just sit in silence, which I found very difficult. And I always mostly wore a dress that had about 50 buttons, and I sat and very carefully undid every button and then did them all back up.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs] It's a form of meditation.

MS. FRANK: Yeah. I would button this dress down, but nobody saw. It was okay.

MS. RICHARDS: And as you were going through those years, were you interested in any particular academic subject, or was academics really not of great interest to you at all?

MS. FRANK: Well, I'm trying to remember if I was already studying dance. No, I wasn't studying dance, but I did after, and that's what I wanted to do.

[Cross talk.]

MS. RICHARDS: Were you an enthusiastic reader?

MS. FRANK: I think I read; I don't think it was in an enthusiastic way. You know, those [inaudible] books, keep on feeding them - you must eat them. But the books I read [inaudible] - I read the [Emily] Brontë, of course. There were some books, of course, I had to read for school, like Silas Marner [The Weaver of Raveloe. George Eliot. London: William Blackwood & Sons Publishers, 1861], which was really a shame that they have given - I don't know how it would have been for a kid, but if they had given you Middlemarch [A Study of Provincial Life. George Eliot. London: William Blackwood & Sons Publishers, 1871], you could have, you know - I don't know; would that appeal to a child, do you think? It's hard to tell. I certainly didn't read it as a child. It's such a phenomenal book.

And I did read some poetry, not for school. My mother had books, and I think some of them were my father's, because I read some French poetry, too, like what's his name - [Paul] Verlaine and -

MS. RICHARDS: Molineaux?

MS. FRANK: Molineaux? No, [Stéphane] Mallarmé. I could have - she probably had Molineaux. No, the one who also wrote art criticism - major, major writer, poet [Paul Valéry]. No, I think I didn't have - not that you would have to at all, but I didn't have good English teachers. They were all - the teacher I mentioned, Conrad, was probably what was called "social studies."

MS. RICHARDS: So you left Friends not because - there were more grades you could have gone to, but you decided to go to a different school.

MS. FRANK: No, my mother - after my aunt died, Sylvia, of cancer, my mother inherited her place in the Village, which was a tiny place on Ninth Street between University [Place] and Fifth Avenue, on the third floor. It would have been a floor-through that had been -

MS. RICHARDS: A brownstone.

MS. FRANK: - that had been divided, right. And those one-room - certainly not as big as this, maybe half the size of this here, which my mother slept, was the dining room, and the meanest kitchen I've ever seen. It was in a closet, and there was a tiny refrigerator and gas burners on top, not on top of the refrigerator. I slept in a tiny room, in a bed on top of an upright piano; there was no room for both.

MS. RICHARDS: But your mother was obviously anxious to move out of her parents' house. So even though it was so tiny, it was an opportunity.

MS. FRANK: Oh, yeah. Oh, I'm sure, sure. I think she was very infantilized, you know. I mean, she had had a life, you know, with friends. She played music with people. She had a life when she lost her husband, really. They divorced - I mean, we were supposed to go back after the war, but they divorced. He was with someone else.

MS. RICHARDS: So you moved to this little place in the Village.

MS. FRANK: And that was fantastic because, you know, I was right near Washington Square, where I used to play the guitar - well, nobody came and listened, and only a few people sang, but it was lots of fun. I loved it. And I went folk dancing also.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you - this is in the '50s - late '50s.

MS. FRANK: No, this was not late '50s. This was the '40s.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, I'm sorry; yes.

[Cross talk.]

This was before the Beats -

MS. FRANK: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: - in the East Village and the Village.

MS. FRANK: Yeah. It's not East Village; it's the Village.

MS. RICHARDS: Village.

MS. FRANK: Yeah. It was not East Village then. I mean, there was something there but it wasn't called East Village, and it wasn't anything like what it became. It was just - it was Ukrainians and others, lots of Ukrainians.

MS. RICHARDS: Poles.

MS. FRANK: What?

MS. RICHARDS: Polish.

MS. FRANK: Poles, yeah. But, yeah, I think that was huge for me, because then I had friends. And I used to go to – do you know what AYD is? American Youth for Democracy. It was the youth branch of the Communist Party. Do you know who Lead Belly is?

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm [affirmative].

MS. FRANK: He used to come and sing. He would sing the song, what do you call, that great quartet – Ronnie Gilbert and – The Weavers. Woodie Guthrie came.

MS. RICHARDS: When you say "came," so there was a meeting place.

MS. FRANK: Came to – they came to where the AYD dances were, which were at the Furriers Union. Now, that's a place that I started to look for, but I never did – and it's on – if it's still – and it could be because that is still the furriers' district, right – West 27th or [2]8th, probably between Seventh and Eighth [Avenues] or Eighth and Ninth

And you'd pay 50 cents, and it's very exciting. You got to dance all night. You would wring out your clothes from all the sweat. And you did square dancing and a few Russian dances, troikas, Russian two-step. That was heaven for me.

MS. RICHARDS: When you moved from Brooklyn to the Village, then you changed schools.

MS. FRANK: Yes, I went to [the High School of] Music & Art.

MS. RICHARDS: And you had to have a portfolio.

MS. FRANK: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember, were those paintings?

MS. FRANK: They were. They were – oh, one that I remember, same subject, flying figures. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: What else?

MS. FRANK: Circus. I mean, so they had –

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, I read that you were interested in the circus.

MS. FRANK: I wanted to be in the circus.

MS. RICHARDS: How did that interest develop?

MS. FRANK: I knew – well, there were two different times, but, I mean, I never really worked at it. I did go to a guy, and old German, who had a little stick that he'd poke you with. I mean, he didn't hurt you, but he did poke you. And he had a room that had a ceiling higher than this, but probably the room wasn't bigger than this, and he had a trapeze hanging from the ceiling – not a flying trapeze but a trapeze.

And while I was trying to – I was not gifted for this. I had been studying dance with [Martha] Graham [Center for Contemporary Dance].

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, so we didn't talk about that yet.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, but at some point, I thought I would love to be in a small circus, like Cole Brothers or something. I've always loved circuses.

MS. RICHARDS: Cole Brothers?

MS. FRANK: That's one of the smaller circuses.

MS. RICHARDS: C-O-L-E?

MS. FRANK: C-O-L-E, yeah. I'm going to figure out what one of the others is; I don't know if they exist anymore,

but they might. There are still some small, sort of tired circuses. I mean, they're not family circuses like in Europe, but they're - not big time. I don't know how they could quite exist now.

Anyhow, somebody told me about this guy - I have no idea - opposite of Macy's [department store], in a building that had this very high ceiling. And I wanted - of course, I knew I would never be a trapeze [artist], possibly. But I thought I could do what's called "web work." Do you know what that is?

MS. RICHARDS: I think so.

MS. FRANK: In Ringling Brothers [Circus] there are about at least 60 girls who go up on a rope, and they're way up high, and their foot is in, or their arm is - something is in. I mean, it's not dangerous the way trapeze is because they're locked in. And at the bottom is a man [laughs] who starts spinning them.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. FRANK: And while he's doing that, they're doing this and that, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. FRANK: That was my aspiration, which was a very low aspiration. I mean, I know I wasn't going to juggle or bareback ride. They were things I would have liked, but, I mean - so I thought - and he told me, "I can get you in the Cole Brothers Circus doing web work," which I'm sure wasn't true, but I didn't do it for very long.

MS. RICHARDS: Going back to the dancing, so how did you start dance?

MS. FRANK: Okay, now, I can't say exactly, but I always look at - my father took me to, in England, as a child, to The Nutcracker [Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky], but he also took me to Petrushka. Do you know Petrushka?

MS. RICHARDS: A little.

MS. FRANK: That's [Igor] Stravinsky. I'm sure my father was very crazy about that. And he had told me that he had been in Paris when [Leonide] Massine, I think, was Petrushka, and the audience was so angry about the music, yelling so much.

MS. RICHARDS: Massine the dancer?

MS. FRANK: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you spell that?

MS. FRANK: M-A-S-S-I-N-E - that when he wasn't dancing, he had to be right next to the - you know, behind the curtain clapping incredibly loud so that the dancers could hear, because people were booing and screaming.

But anyhow, I never forgot that performance, because it was [Leon] Baskt's set [design]. I, in my mind, thought it was [Henri] Matisse. I didn't know who Matisse was then - I didn't know who anyone was; I was child - but they looked very much - it could have been Matisse. Anyway, but he was a very famous set designer for the -

MS. RICHARDS: Tell me the name again.

MS. FRANK: B-A-K-S-T. And it turns out he was the uncle-in-law or something of a very good friend of mine, or great uncle, yeah - Bakst. But the set was extraordinary because - do you know the Petrushka story at all?

There's three characters. There's a Moor - black Moor. There's Petrushka, the clown, and there's the girl, who's a doll. I mean, they're all - and the owner of the puppets, of all of them, who is very, very bad, and this huge Russian market scene with snow, with people playing and dancing and bears and the works. It's very, very impressive.

But the most impressive, actually, was the set where, divided down the middle vertically, is a wall, and so there are two rooms. And in one room is the girl, who was a very great dancer. I forget her name - a Russian. This is all the - I think this was the Ballet Russes, [Sergei] Diaghilev [director]. And my father had written a lot about them, and in his book there are photographs of Jan Left [ph] and other people.

On the other side, the girl's room, I really don't remember so well, whatever it was, and then Petrushka's room was very wild. And so you saw these two rooms divided, and he - banging on the wall to try to get to her. It's very - it was very - it was very radical dancing at that time; I mean, very, you know, forceful and not with the feet out but with the feet like this, [inaudible]. But then there must have been also a room of the Moor, which was very, very exotic.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were in New York and you were thinking of studying dance, how did you know where to go? How did you end up with Martha Graham?

MS. FRANK: Well, it must have been through my mother, because I didn't – I didn't go looking. And first, when I was younger, she had me studying with Hanya Holm. That sounds like the Civil War to me, doesn't it? I mean, if I say Hanya Holm to someone [laughs], they think I should be even older than I am. And Wideman – Jim Wideman. Do you know who that is?

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-mm [negative].

MS. FRANK: And so those two first – Wideman and his partner; I forget what his name is – but then I got to Graham, and then I became, you know, an adorer, which you had to be if you were there. There was no other way to be. And I was – it wasn't like ballet, where everybody was young. I was fairly young – well, I wasn't young; I was, I don't know, 14, 15, 16, something like that.

And then one summer I studied at the first year of the American School of the Dance in New London, where Graham –

MS. RICHARDS: In Connecticut.

MS. FRANK: – was teaching. And what's his name – he's a great Mexican –

MS. RICHARDS: José Limón.

MS. FRANK: José Limón, and New Dance Group, which were three women who had come out of Graham.

MS. RICHARDS: Where in Connecticut?

MS. FRANK: I think New London.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MS. FRANK: I think so.

MS. RICHARDS: And you weren't doing this instead of high school; you were doing it in addition?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, yeah, except I was not very – well, I was interested in some things in high school, but I only went there for two years, to [Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of] Music & Art, because by then I had met Robert [Frank].

MS. RICHARDS: So you went until you were 16 or 17?

MS. FRANK: No, no, I was probably 15, because then I went to two years of the most absurd school of all, Professional Children's School.

MS. RICHARDS: Which was meant for children who are on stage acting and –

MS. FRANK: Yes, which I wasn't – yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Why did you end up going there?

MS. FRANK: Because I didn't want to really be in school.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh. It was the best nonschool school.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, yeah, and somehow I managed to – I once performed in some strange thing, actually, at Carnegie Hall.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it an issue for your mother, to go to this nonschool?

MS. FRANK: Apparently not, which was sort of odd, really, but –

MS. RICHARDS: Would you say that you – she would think that you were so strongly motivated to do what you wanted to do that it didn't really matter what she thought?

MS. FRANK: First of all, I don't know really what was going on in her life. I mean, I know by then she had a lover, who was quite a wonderful man, an Israeli: a Sabra, born in Israel from Russian – like the first people who went. And he described, as a child in Israel, Palestine, playing with Arab children.

MS. RICHARDS: Let's change this.

[END CD 1.]

This is Judith Richards interviewing Mary Frank on January 10, 2010, at 139 West 19th Street in Manhattan [New York City], for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc two.

We were talking about your mother's -

MS. FRANK: - lover.

MS. RICHARDS: Lover. Do you remember his name?

MS. FRANK: Amihud Nachmani.

MS. RICHARDS: Could you spell that?

MS. FRANK: Amihud is A-M-I-H-U-D, and Nachmani is N-A-C-H-M-A-N-I. He was married. He had been married before and divorced, and felt that he lost connection with one of his two sons in that, and so he was not going to give up the marriage for my mother.

But they were lovers for years, and I'm sure it was terrible for his wife, who I got to know after, initially. But later, when my mother was sick, she brought things to her in the hospital.

MS. RICHARDS: Where did - where did he live?

MS. FRANK: In New York on the way Upper West Side.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, so, very far away. Well, sort of far. You were still on Ninth Street.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, yeah, but what he described as being a child and playing with Arab children, they didn't have toys or anything. I mean, it was a very, very rough life. It was not having any water and everything, but they'd play with stones.

They'd be playing with another child, maybe about seven years old, and all of a sudden the child would say - you'd see his mother way across this, basically, desert, and she would say to Amihud, "I'll be back in a minute." And he would go to his mother, who had a new baby and three other children, four other children, and he would nurse and come back and play, probably because that was how to get something to drink, not the only way.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah, that's the story that stuck in your mind.

MS. FRANK: He had many stories. They were all very strong. He had an enormous sense of history.

MS. RICHARDS: How long did you continue living on East Ninth Street? Until you were on your own?

MS. FRANK: I was never on my own. I moved from Ninth Street to 11th Street when I married Robert, moved that three blocks.

MS. RICHARDS: But, so until you did that, you stayed -

MS. FRANK: Yeah, I got married, I think, three days after I graduated from that silly school, but I was already pregnant.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, let me just go back for a second. So you were studying dance.

MS. FRANK: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And did you think you would be - wanted to be a dancer?

MS. FRANK: I did. That was what I wanted.

MS. RICHARDS: So you were serious about that.

MS. FRANK: I didn't want to be a painter or an artist, probably because of my mother. I didn't want to do the same thing. It wasn't that I didn't like those things, but I was crazy about dance. I was very crazy about Graham, and I don't think, if I'd continued, I would have ever gotten into the troupe. I don't think I was good enough.

But I did have one good insight about myself, which was I saw so many of her dances in the troupe, and Pearl Lang and all different people, who were wonderful dancers.

MS. RICHARDS: Who did you say?

MS. FRANK: Pearl Lang. I think she just died recently. Helen McGee, I don't remember the names now; they all tried to choreograph, to become choreographers, and they could not get out from under. It was so strong. It was very much like Picasso in a way, if he had a dance troupe, [laughs] an art troupe. Now, Paul Taylor, of course, did, and he was in her troupe then.

But if you know - do you know Graham's work at all? If you know her work and you see his work, even though he has done extraordinary and very varied things and very rich things, the language is there, right? I mean, yeah, I'm not saying that in any derogatory way, and maybe there are others who have, but I don't know who else. Do you think there are others? It was too powerful.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. How did you meet Robert?

MS. FRANK: I used to go dancing with a man named Bob Kaufman. He wasn't a boyfriend. He was a - I had all these people I used to go dancing with - and he was a merchant seaman, and he was probably a communist, and he was black, and he was Jewish. And he later became, I think, one of the, sort of, Beat poets in San Francisco. I think he then took a lot of drugs or something. He was just a very nice man, and we used to go to AYD things. There was also a lot of singing then, not just dancing, right, lots of singing.

Somehow he knew Robert, and he took me to his loft. I don't know how long Robert had been in this country. I don't think very long, really, and he was - I'm trying to think if he was doing fashion then, when I first met him; that's certainly what he was doing after, and what we mostly lived on.

I think a lot of people have no idea. He didn't like it, and he did it differently than most people, probably because he was using the Leica. And very soon after I met him, he went to Peru.

That had been his idea, I think when he left Switzerland - get out of Switzerland, get away from his family, his Jewish bourgeois family, and come to the States, but also some books that he read as a child about Incas. And he went to Peru. He didn't speak Spanish. He went up in the mountains. He photographed that. I don't know how long he was there.

When he came back, I lived on Ninth Street, between University and Fifth, and his loft was the building that became the - what's the publisher who published O [Pauline Réage. The Story of O. New York: Grove Press, 1965] and published all kinds of things, Least Valdot [ph] and all kinds of things that couldn't get published anywhere, Hence Village [ph], I'll think of it. Anyhow, they later got that building. It was a little building between two factories, but it had a big skylight, and that was between University and Broadway.

MS. RICHARDS: On 11th Street?

MS. FRANK: Yes. I didn't move very far. I moved two and a quarter blocks. I knew it was close. I never realized how close it was, and, really, a big part of the reason I went to that - wanted to go to that other school was partly because I was taking a lot of dance classes with Graham, so it allowed me. And I took classes with other people, too. I took a little bit of this and that, some Indian dance classes, some other things, but mainly I did study-

MS. RICHARDS: As a teenager, did you have jobs to earn pocket money, or did your mother pay for all these classes?

MS. FRANK: No, my mother paid. Nobody ever really talked about money. She really had very little, but it wasn't talked about. And I did - I modeled some. I did make a little money.

MS. RICHARDS: As an artist's model?

MS. FRANK: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: So you met Robert and -

MS. FRANK: I met Robert, and then he went to Peru. And when he came back, I was walking on University Place, and I was wearing a black coat, that the jacket stuck way out, like this somewhat.

And I don't remember now if he said something to me on the street then, or he called me and was talking to me, but later told me that he thought I was pregnant, which was prophetic. But it wasn't true then, and it was just the jacket. And he said something about, God, how can - she's so young and she's pregnant, or something,

which in fact-

So I mean, I had to have my mother come, because I was underage when we got married.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you, at that point when you were getting married, you still saw yourself as a dancer?

MS. FRANK: I did, but then that was over, because Graham didn't let anyone have children.

MS. RICHARDS: In your experience growing up in New York, did you often, or occasionally, go to the Metropolitan Museum [of Art] or other museums?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, I went to the Metropolitan. I liked the Metropolitan, and I went to the Modern [Museum of Modern Art], I think, some, too. But I loved the Metropolitan, and I loved the - and I went to the Natural History Museum, where I drew. The Natural History Museum, for me, was like a temple.

MS. RICHARDS: That was your favorite?

MS. FRANK: Both; well, the whole thing with the animals but also such a rich -

[Cross talk.]

MS. RICHARDS: At what point - obviously, the early years of your marriage, with being so young and having a baby and not having money, were very difficult. But somehow, from what I understand, you were drawing, and you were creating a life as an artist.

MS. FRANK: I was trying to.

MS. RICHARDS: You were trying to.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, but at tremendous expense to the children, tremendous.

MS. RICHARDS: And you were living on 11th Street? Did you have -

MS. FRANK: Well, we lived on 11th Street only for a very short time, because Robert wrote to his parents that he married me. They had no idea who I was, nothing. He did say I was Jewish. I think he probably said how old I was. They wrote him back a scathing letter. It really upset him a lot, and he was always rebelling against his family, but he was really knocked out by that letter. And so his response was to send me over with the baby.

He was working, photographing, trying to get a prize from Life magazine, which he did. Maybe he didn't get the first prize. He got the second prize or something, and one of those pictures is me nursing Pablo, which was very rare, and one of the pictures was of a photographer named Louis Stettner.

I've left out a huge piece, I just realized, which is - I'd have to figure out what year. The Korean War, Robert would have been drafted. He wasn't a citizen.

MS. RICHARDS: I think it was something like '51 to '54.

MS. FRANK: No, earlier.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MS. FRANK: I know it's earlier than that. It was -

[Cross talk.]

MS. RICHARDS: Before you were married?

MS. FRANK: So it was '49 or something, '48 even, and so he went to live in Paris. He left the country.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, you said to avoid being drafted.

MS. FRANK: Drafted, and he made an exchange with a very extraordinary man, a Chinese painter named San-yu, a very, very interesting man. So that man came and stayed in his loft. He'd never been in this country. He didn't speak any English at all. He spoke French with a Chinese accent. He was a very interesting painter. He had no money at all, none. I would sometimes give him two dollars.

He would go to Chinatown and come back with a big bag of all [inaudible] pig livers and all those. But he was a very good cook. And Robert stayed in his studio in Paris in the 14th arrondissement. And my father, who I

hadn't seen since I was seven, not much, he had come once after the war to give lectures here or something, and I saw him that one time.

I think he complained to my mother a lot about how she brought me up. I don't know what went on. But anyhow, they were divorced.

He was going to judge some competition or something in Paris or something, and he asked me if I would like to come.

MS. RICHARDS: So this is maybe '49? You were 16?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, maybe '50, maybe, '48; I think maybe '48 but the latest '49. I jumped. I didn't know my father. I didn't have any interest knowing my father. But I wanted to go to Paris to see Robert. I didn't mention that to my father. And I said, yes, I'll come. And I took a boat and met him.

We stayed in a hotel on the Rue Bonaparte, and he was of course, you know, working a lot. And I would go out, and I would be with Robert, and I would come home very, very late, and my father, who I think really didn't have much to do with children, period - I mean, not just me, I think he had not much idea - and he got very, very angry and said if I continued doing that, he would send me back to the States.

I wasn't used to anything of this kind, and I just thought it was ridiculous. I continued doing what I wanted, and then he locked me in the hotel and went to see about getting a passport and sending me back. This story's so bizarre, really.

I was on the second floor, and I was just desperate to get out, and spoke a little French. There was a little telephone there. And I remember lots of cherry pits, because I'd been eating cherries.

Are you comfortable?

MS. RICHARDS: No, I'm just going to move the recorder a little closer to you.

MS. FRANK: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: There.

MS. FRANK: My voice is not strong. Have you checked?

MS. RICHARDS: It's fine.

MS. FRANK: I wrote notes and put cherry pits in them and wrapped them up so they would get the attention of people walking on Rue Bonaparte, and nobody noticed. One person got hit slightly on the head, but it doesn't weigh anything, a cherry pit, and I think one person even maybe looked at the paper.

I just didn't - it was - a joke, ridiculous, and then somehow I got someone in the hotel to let me out, and I went to Robert, and he got me to some people in Malakoff. It was a big, I think, communist, working class -

MS. RICHARDS: Suburb?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, right -

MS. RICHARDS: Malakoff?

MS. FRANK: Malakoff, yeah, and I don't know how I met them at the Place de la Concorde. And they took me, and all I wanted to do was get away from my father, really, and be with Robert.

But Robert said I couldn't stay with him, because he thought the police would be looking for me, which, in fact, they were. And my father wasn't my guardian; my mother was my guardian. He didn't have any official - and years later I realized he must have been scared shitless, you know. Here he was with his daughter who he hardly knew, and she's running away and all that.

So I stayed with those people a little. I remember I had my period. There were no pads or anything. They gave me a rag and said, "lavez-le," wash it. And they were nice, but they didn't want me going out of the house.

So I was stuck there and no telephones or anything, no way to - it's really funny to think. It's not 100 years ago, but it seems like it could be, or 200.

And then they got scared because they saw a little thing in the newspaper, Englishman looking for his American daughter or something, "Minor, minor." So I don't know. I got taken to some other place, and that other place -

I never figured out what was going on. There were people coming in and out. They had me polishing the floors à la française, with a - you know that?

MS. RICHARDS: Chamois, kind of?

MS. FRANK: Well, on your feet, you know? Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Dancing as you're polishing.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, [laughs] that seemed to be a main concern, to get the floors really shiny. And then the man of the house went to the police and turned me in. I was so angry to be turned in that the only thing that came to my head was, I'm not going to talk to anyone.

I'm not going to open my mouth, which I didn't, and my father was in the other room talking to the police [inaudible] and everything, and I just wouldn't talk to anyone. It was very stupid, obviously. I would have done better [inaudible] I could think of, and I was, you know, scared.

They drove me - they put me in a car and drove me to a British hospital in Paris, which is outside Paris, I think. So I got there. I thought, if I get out of here - I remembered that Robert had a cousin who was Légion d'honneur or something from having been in the Spanish Civil War. I met him a few times, Bobby Duvall [ph] or something like that. I tried to call him.

MS. RICHARDS: Let me write that name down.

MS. FRANK: It's just Bobby. I can't remember the last time. It's not Duvall.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay.

MS. FRANK: And a doctor came. He said, "If you make another telephone call, we're going to take you and put you in an asylum," and I - that's impossible. At that point I should have realized nothing was impossible, of what could be done. So I tried again, and all of a sudden they came, put me in an ambulance, took me to the oldest asylum in Paris.

MS. RICHARDS: What could making a phone call - how did that indicate that you were mentally unstable?

MS. FRANK: Oh, they didn't think I was mentally unstable, I don't think. I think they just were troubled by what -

MS. RICHARDS: But they had control over you.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, tell you anything.

MS. RICHARDS: Your father knew you were there?

MS. FRANK: Well, he absolutely did know I was there, yeah, and I was in solitary, then, for a week. And Robert came, and they told him I'd gone back to America. When he found out finally, he went to the British hospital first, and then he finally found out where I was. That was very -

MS. RICHARDS: And how did you get out finally?

MS. FRANK: Well, my mother had to fly over.

First they said I could sit in a garden. It was like a court, you know, and very much like [Vincent] van Gogh's paintings, you know, that kind of, with the fountain [The Asylum Garden at Arles, 1889].

I thought, well, at least I can sit here. And I sat there, and they said, no, no, no, you can't sit here; upstairs in your room. And they brought me food, and I had, I guess, a nurse. Somebody gave me, like, a little ball of yellow wool, pale yellow, but little, and I either crocheted or knitted it and took it out. I had nothing.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you ever discover under what authority they did that?

MS. FRANK: No, no.

MS. RICHARDS: You were a minor and somehow - unclaimed minor.

MS. FRANK: My father let them do it, certainly. I mean, he didn't -

MS. RICHARDS: So your mother had to fly over, which in those days was quite extraordinary to take an airplane.

MS. FRANK: Yes, and she was very afraid. I think she'd never taken an airplane.

MS. RICHARDS: And the expense was huge.

MS. FRANK: In the meantime, I had written a very crazy letter to my mother, thinking, well, maybe she's going to worry about me. "I'm in the south of France. There are goats and sheep here. There's a very nice family. Everything's fine." Fantasy, fantasy, fantasy, fantasy.

MS. RICHARDS: So when she came, you went back to New York?

MS. FRANK: She took me back, and Robert came back to the States, I don't know how much later. It seemed very long to me.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you know at that point that you were seriously involved with him, with Robert, that that was -

MS. FRANK: Well, my idea of serious, certainly.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. FRANK: I mean, I was in love, very influenced by it. He was nine years older. He'd been a lot of places and had a kind of - he was very depressed, always. But I think that went under the heading of poetic or something, terrible.

MS. RICHARDS: Sure.

MS. FRANK: I mean, it's a really different time.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, teenagers.

MS. FRANK: Well, also [Albert] Camus and Europe and what's his name and what's her name.

MS. RICHARDS: [Jean-Paul] Sartre, de Beauvoir.

MS. FRANK: Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir and, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. FRANK: I had a diet of French art movies with Simone Signoret and [inaudible] really the most masochistic terms.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. FRANK: I don't think other kids I knew, that's what they were looking at.

MS. RICHARDS: So, I mean, you finally escaped, got back to New York.

MS. FRANK: And I was with my mother.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah.

MS. FRANK: I'm sure very depressed; she tried to have me go to a therapist, but I wasn't interested in going. And I felt that she didn't condemn my father, you know, and I mean, whatever her feelings about my father were, which I really don't know, she probably could have sympathized that he was scared shitless, particularly because he wasn't my guardian and there's this girl -

MS. RICHARDS: And he didn't know who you were.

MS. FRANK: Not at all, no, and he tried to -

MS. RICHARDS: Whoops, sorry, what?

MS. FRANK: He tried to put Robert in jail, but the French police were not very interested. Can you imagine how many 15-year-olds run away from their fathers, mothers, grandfathers, whatever, in Paris? French ones, Russian ones, American.

MS. RICHARDS: Skipping a little bit -

MS. FRANK: But I did – I did know one thing, in that asylum, was I heard people screaming a lot, really just screaming and screaming and screaming, and nobody came or anything, and some of them, I think, were Argentine. They were speaking Spanish.

I never saw anyone, but I had this very strong feeling that if – I didn't think I was crazy. I was in some ways, but I didn't think so at all, and I had a very strong feeling that if I stayed there for I don't know how long, that I would be crazy, absolutely.

I mean, to be isolated like that in a room, and also I had anything – I had a little piece of paper, and I covered it with poems that I remembered or something. I just wrote. I didn't have a book.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. FRANK: And now I think it's rather amazing that I didn't have a really major breakdown. I really do, because it was so – and there was no way to know when I would – they never told me Robert came.

MS. RICHARDS: Certainly a nightmare.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, so.

MS. RICHARDS: So when you came back, some point a year later, you married Robert?

MS. FRANK: Well, I know we got married in 1950, in June, and that I'd just graduated – Graham school.

MS. RICHARDS: And you had Pablo, and you –

MS. FRANK: And then got shipped to Switzerland, where no one knew what to make of me.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, and how long were you in Switzerland?

MS. FRANK: It was absolutely crazy to send me alone with a baby. I took a suitcase with [inaudible] – and two pieces of clothing for him. I don't know where –

MS. RICHARDS: What was your state of mind?

MS. FRANK: Well, I didn't want to go.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you feel like you had to do everything he told you to do, Robert?

MS. FRANK: Well, he was very domineering, no question, and he said his parents had to meet me.

MS. RICHARDS: So it sounds like a very plausible thing to do.

MS. FRANK: They put us on a cargo boat. It took two weeks, and then I was in this really alien place, because, I mean, Switzerland then was already a very isolated, or insulated, I think, culturally. I mean, I can't even say that, but I think it's true. And then Jews in Switzerland were more so.

There was a lot of anti-Semitism, a lot, really a lot, and nobody ever came in the house who wasn't Jewish, and hardly anyone came in the house anyhow.

His father went to prostitutes and tried to gamble, but the women's league of Zurich, they couldn't vote, but they got back by enforcing no cafes could stay open after 10:30 or something really crazy. I remember saying to his mother once, I said – there's nothing even at the station, at the train station, where you can get a coffee?

She said, of course, if you travel, the men have to get up in the morning and go to work. They can't – they can't – and I wanted to work, and his father had a shop, a small, not a factory but a number of people worked making consoles for – this is before television – for radio and gramophone.

MS. RICHARDS: So a woodworking shop?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, I mean, he was a salesman, and he sold them. And so I thought, well, I was working in wood. I was carving wood then, and I thought, well, I'll go there. I mean, his mother and a maid could watch Pablo, and they thought that was an absolutely grotesque idea, because I should be knitting the little woolen things.

MS. RICHARDS: Baby clothes.

MS. FRANK: Baby clothes and socks, and for your husband, hats and scarves and gloves. And I did go and try to work there, but it was not very good.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you end up being – how long did you have to stay in Zurich?

MS. FRANK: Went in – I think I was there maybe two months, which was very long. Robert was supposed to come, and he was working more or something, whatever, and then I said to them, I said, I can't stay any longer.

I'm going to go to Paris. And I took a train and somehow got through to San-yu, the Chinese painter. I got a chambre de bonne, maid's room, right near the Folies Bergère. It was really terrible. The little bed for Pablo had bedbugs, but I didn't know it. It was very, very bad.

MS. RICHARDS: And you finally came back to the –

MS. FRANK: No, we lived in Europe. And then Robert finally came, and we got an apartment that the window didn't close. And it doesn't snow in Paris often, but it actually snowed into the house. And then we did go to Spain, and that was very extraordinary.

MS. RICHARDS: That was still around '50? Before you studied drawing with Hans Hofmann in New York, before all that?

MS. FRANK: No, because I studied briefly with Hofmann after Pablo was born, for a short time.

MS. RICHARDS: And Max Beckmann.

MS. FRANK: And Beckmann.

MS. RICHARDS: So this is that –

MS. FRANK: Nobody's ever found the school that I studied with Beckmann. They think I make it up, I think, but I think it was called the American Art School, and I think it was on 135th and Broadway. And it's very odd, because he was teaching in Brooklyn then, which everybody knows, and, well, he also taught, of course, in, what do you call it, not New Orleans.

MS. RICHARDS: St. Louis.

MS. FRANK: St. Louis, but I think maybe he taught somewhere else in New York.

But I have no idea how I got to that. It was a tiny place, and he put his – he must have been quite sick then, although he always pale, right, very white, moonfaced, and I think he died quite shortly after. But he came, and he put – you know what an adze is? A-D-Z-E, like an axe, but the thing goes this way instead of this way. And an adze mark is like a very – it's not a straight line, but it's hardly a curved line, right, and he put those lines on everyone's drawings, which made them much better. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: You started – how did you get started with woodcarving to begin with?

MS. FRANK: I went to – either I got some – I know. My mother –

MS. RICHARDS: Because this is the first – your first – besides drawing.

MS. FRANK: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Your first engagement.

MS. FRANK: With materials, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: With visual art as an artist.

MS. FRANK: My mother gave me a set of woodcarving tools, which I think really were for her, because she wanted to carve frames for her paintings.

But I certainly used them. They were quite good English Sheffield tools, and I carved small wooden pieces. And before 11th Street, there was a fire escape, and there was a very nice shoemaker down the block, an older Italian man; he was probably 40, right, you know, time, age.

And he knew I liked to carve wood, and he came and put up a vise on the fire escape, a little vise to hold the wood. And I carved and worked small, sort of artful pieces, very influenced by Henry Moore and maybe some by [Alberto] Giacometti.

MS. RICHARDS: Who you had seen at MoMA [Museum of Modern Art].

MS. FRANK: Yeah, yeah, and I liked both of those men very much.

MS. RICHARDS: So then you resumed that after you were married, or you continued it. Where did you live when you came back? Where in New York?

MS. FRANK: Well, first of all, we were in Paris. We were in Valencia.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, forgot that, yeah.

MS. FRANK: We were gone for maybe close to two years.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, following Robert's work?

MS. FRANK: Well, he didn't have work.

MS. RICHARDS: Or his interest in places to photograph.

MS. FRANK: Actually, I wanted to go to Spain very much, because in Paris I saw those - I forget what they call it, and it still goes on. It's a tradition where the university, I think medical students but it may be others - there's a name for it [troupes known as a "University Tuna"], and I can't think what it is. They dressed as, like, Renaissance sort of, not Renaissance, later, black velvet cape and pants and stockings, and they play music, and they go.

They leave Spain, and they travel around Europe, and they're usually a group of three, maybe four. And they're very romantic, and they play beautifully, and they sing. And I sort of followed some around in Paris.

I saw them several times, and because of that I wanted to go to Spain. I knew nothing. My mother had been in Spain in - she'd been there; could she have been there before the Spanish Civil War? The Spanish Civil War was '33, '36?

MS. RICHARDS: Thirty-six.

MS. FRANK: Thirty-six, she must have been there before, sometime with my father. I think they were both very interested in the music. I don't remember him talking to me about it, but she did. I mean, it was incredibly poor and miserable, but it was also very interesting, which was my experience in Spain in Valencia.

And now, it was in Gandia de Valencia, the port, which was a separate, like a tiny village, with a tram that sometimes went into Valencia and all these little restaurants right on the water, right on the beach, and we lived in a room above a restaurant. There were also chickens on the roof, and the people were wonderful. I'd never seen people like that, so, I don't know, open.

MS. RICHARDS: What brought you back from Europe?

MS. FRANK: Oh, we got very - we all got very sick, hepatitis, serious sick, including Pablo, who didn't get yellow. Sometimes babies don't. But we were all sick, and the only thing you could do was get injections from a guy on a bicycle who didn't clean the needle.

It was really - they talked about sometimes a few people came from Madrid, and they would refer to them [in Spanish] like people were coming from Germany or something. It was so provincial.

I saw one Dutch woman in the - we were there for three months, four months, and I never saw an American. The American bases were not there then. [Francisco] Franco was still there. We saw funerals of babies.

MS. RICHARDS: Because of the medical situation? There was nothing.

MS. FRANK: No, no.

MS. RICHARDS: And you couldn't get to Madrid to have proper care?

MS. FRANK: Well, we only went to Madrid to get out, but that was at the end. And then I had impetigo and a fever, and Robert was in bed in the hotel with Pablo, and I ran to the [Museo del] Prado. I thought I had one chance to go, and when I saw the [Francisco] Goyas, I didn't know. I mean, the black Goyas. So the guard said, "Los Goyas negras [inaudible]," and I thought this guard was absolutely crazy. These are not Goyas. I only knew the others, right, and then I thought, well, I have a fever. I'm hallucinating. I don't even know what I'm seeing.

It was very impressive. But it was a very short visit, and then we finally - we had to wait for a train to get out

somehow to Paris, and then we went back to Switzerland for the cure.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, and hopefully you were all –

MS. FRANK: Took a long time, yeah, yeah – yeah, because it wasn't really – I don't think even now, I'm not sure. I don't think there's really, like, a cure for hepatitis.

MS. RICHARDS: There's a vaccine. I don't know.

MS. FRANK: What?

MS. RICHARDS: There's a vaccine now.

MS. FRANK: That's different, but when you have it, it's not like they can give you something. You have to really wait it out. It's very depressive, the idea of picking up a cup of tea seems, "Oh, my God, I'm not going to get this to my mouth." It's just too difficult. But we did get better, and then, so, I don't know where. We were also in England for several months, in London.

MS. RICHARDS: And during these early years, did you feel fairly secure that you're going to be an artist?

MS. FRANK: No, I don't think I felt secure about anything, certainly not about being a mother, certainly not – when we went to Spain, and we got to Valencia, then Robert took off instantly for Seville [Spain], leaving me with Pablo.

I didn't speak a word of Spanish, and I think he wanted to go for Semana Santa [Holy Week], which he did. There was no reason to feel secure about anything. I had tremendous, what do you call it, motivation, determination, something, to work, but it was – traveling.

MS. RICHARDS: When you finally got back, did life settle down a little bit?

MS. FRANK: I'm trying to remember where we lived when we got back.

MS. RICHARDS: At one point you lived on West 86th [Street], and I don't know –

MS. FRANK: On 23rd Street.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, 23rd?

MS. FRANK: I think that's where we lived. I'm trying to figure out where Andrea was born – lived on 23rd between Sixth and Seventh Avenue, in quite a, really nice loft, I mean, had no real bathroom or no real kitchen, but it was a nice space.

MS. RICHARDS: Heat?

MS. FRANK: What?

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have heat?

MS. FRANK: Heat? No, not very much, and very old radiators. And it was that thing where it was before AIR [Artist in Residence], that that was something, so sometimes an inspector would come. And one time he came, and he looked at this old thing, this little –

MS. RICHARDS: Stove?

MS. FRANK: No, it was a radiator, a gas radiator, I guess. You lit it.

MS. RICHARDS: Rather than hot steam?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, and he said, "You get this out of here, or you can't live here," or "If you don't get this out, then you have to get out," because he said it was illegal. He did something with color, and it turned black or whatever.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. FRANK: So the living conditions were often really – they were difficult. That's not what the focus was on. But it made everything, certainly, much more difficult. I did work there. I worked in plaster, and I guess I was carving, then, larger wood pieces.

MS. RICHARDS: I read something about what's inspired you to start working in plaster, that you saw someone -

MS. FRANK: Nakian?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, Reuben Nakian.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, I liked his work a lot, and - you know those pieces?

MS. RICHARDS: I saw pictures of them.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, in plaster or in bronze, because they got cast -

MS. RICHARDS: I'm not sure.

MS. FRANK: They got cast after, and to me, they just got dead, completely dead. It's not always true.

MS. RICHARDS: And you studied again briefly with Hans Hofmann?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, twice I went there.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that useful?

MS. FRANK: Well, it was very useful, but not so much because of Hofmann, but because of other students.

MS. RICHARDS: The people you met? Who did you meet?

MS. FRANK: Jan Müller. You know his work?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. FRANK: Oh, that's good. I'm so glad. Most people don't know who he is.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MS. FRANK: Don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: And that was the development of a relationship?

MS. FRANK: Oh, yeah, yeah, we were close, and Miles Forst and -

MS. RICHARDS: I'm sorry, who?

MS. FRANK: Miles Forst. He was a painter. He's dead now. And Dick [Richard] Bellamy, who wasn't studying at Hofmann [School of Fine Arts], but he was very close friends with Miles and with Jan and, and, and what's his name, the "Happenings"?

MS. RICHARDS: Red Grooms? Allan Kaprow?

MS. FRANK: Kaprow, but I knew Red Grooms, and I traveled with him.

MS. RICHARDS: That's why he came up, because I remember reading about that.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, that was later.

MS. RICHARDS: During these early years in New York when you lived on 23rd Street, were there other artists, photographers, people who you were friends with, who were important to you?

MS. FRANK: I'm trying to think. I think there were. There's a guy, Felix Pasilis.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you spell that?

MS. FRANK: P-A-S-I-L-I-S, and I'm trying to think.

MS. RICHARDS: Is he a sculptor?

MS. FRANK: Painter.

MS. RICHARDS: A painter.

MS. FRANK: I wasn't close with him, but all these people, or a lot of them, came out of Hofmann. So there were - I'm trying to think.

MS. RICHARDS: I mean, the issue of being isolated with a child and not having money and not being in university, you probably were eager to make connections.

MS. FRANK: I was, and I'm trying to think.

MS. RICHARDS: And you didn't mention any women. Were there any women who you -

MS. FRANK: There was a very important woman for me, who you may or may not know, Marjorie Israel Ponce?

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, I've heard of her.

MS. FRANK: She's a great, great artist.

MS. RICHARDS: Ponce?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, P-O-N-C-E, yeah, she was born in Cuba, but she came as a baby here. And I think she was really kind of genius, I think. She was, and I think Peter Schumann is absolutely a genius, those two, in very different ways.

She was a big influence. I'm trying to think when I would have met her. It wasn't right then. It was later because she was married to Marvin Israel, and Marvin was deeply involved with Diane Arbus.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, that's what I've heard.

And so you were carving these massive pieces. Where did you get the chunks of wood? That must have been hard to haul. I guess they weren't all big pieces.

MS. FRANK: Well, some were big, and people would haul them.

MS. RICHARDS: You enlisted?

MS. FRANK: And I found them on the street, a lot of the wood was street wood and then we would be on the Cape [Cape Cod, MA] often in the summer, and then I'd find wood on the beach.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, I was going to ask you, how did the-

MS. FRANK: Cape?

MS. RICHARDS: -going to the Cape in the summers happen?

[Audio break.]

We just have a few more minutes on this disc.

MS. FRANK: I didn't love Hofmann's painting. I still could have appreciated his teaching, but it was, I don't know, too arrogant or something. I didn't get it.

MS. RICHARDS: And why, as a sculptor, did you take a class from a painting teacher?

MS. FRANK: I was drawing there. I wasn't painting. There were people who were painting, but mostly it was drawings, and life [drawing], which is what I did.

MS. RICHARDS: But most of the other students, weren't they aspiring painters? Or maybe I'm wrong.

MS. FRANK: Well, they may have been, but they were drawing there. They were drawing from life. I mean, some of them were also painting, but I just went to life classes. And he turned up sometimes, not a lot. He said, psychological, very good.

MS. RICHARDS: He said you were good psychologically?

MS. FRANK: No, that the drawing, psychologically, was good. I don't think it was good in some other way, but anyhow, whatever. But he didn't say much to me, but I also didn't admire him the way everybody there did. And I don't say that as something I'm proud of. I just didn't. So I think other people really could learn. There was a lot to learn.

MS. RICHARDS: At that point, you didn't live near the 10th Street galleries, but you frequented them, right? You were aware of what was there and the artists showing?

MS. FRANK: No, that's earlier. I was still – maybe the second time I went - I forget what year it was.

MS. RICHARDS: In '54.

MS. FRANK: In '54, Andrea was born, and I just went once a week sometimes. I don't think I went to the 10th Street galleries then. I went after when we lived on Third Avenue, when I was on – I was with the 10th Street galleries.

MS. RICHARDS: So did you move straight from 23rd Street to –

MS. FRANK: No, Robert had the Guggenheim [Fellowship], and we traveled for it, you know, seems like a year. Yeah, that's when that show, right, "The Americans" [which became the book: Robert Frank. The Americans. Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2008; originally 1958].

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, yes.

MS. FRANK: Whatever year that was, we –

MS. RICHARDS: Maybe '56, and you met up with him in the southwest, near Texas.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, Texas. Well, I traveled with him to Georgia, one part of the trip, and then we came back, and then he took off again, and then I met him in Texas, yeah. And then we drove a month across Texas, and then we were living outside, maybe it wasn't outside, L.A.[Los Angeles, CA], Mulholland Drive, and they wanted to arrest me because I was walking on the street.

You can't walk. I mean, they're right, because it's very dangerous. There's no place to walk.

MS. RICHARDS: Certainly, if you were walking on Mulholland.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, yeah, you're not –

MS. RICHARDS: During all those travels while he was –

MS. FRANK: I didn't drive.

MS. RICHARDS: - doing that photography, were there any experiences that you felt, then or later, were influential to your own work, any museums you saw or artists you met?

MS. FRANK: I don't think I got to almost any museums. Maybe in San Francisco [CA] I went to a museum. We lived there for about a month. It's really an interesting question. I don't think so, except –

[END CD 2.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Mary Frank on January 10, 2010, 139 West 19th Street in New York, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc three.

So we were talking about your travels, the time you were traveling while Robert was photographing what would be The Americans.

MS. FRANK: When we left Texas and we got into New Mexico, I'd never seen that landscape, and I was very astounded by it. And I've been back there since, several times, and, I mean, I couldn't use it then. I didn't even think of landscape, really, as a subject for me. Everything was, really, I think, figure and animal, bird, plant, but not [dead] stuff.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you see any Native American art at that point or pictograms?

MS. FRANK: I don't think then, and I don't think I was in one museum in –

[Cross talk.]

MS. RICHARDS: You had already, though, seen that work, perhaps at the American Museum of Natural History?

MS. FRANK: It's possible that I did. It's possible. I don't have a memory of it, but those somehow - the way things were, going to a museum was just not somehow not possible, or I didn't know. We weren't there that long, not like Texas, which was a month.

MS. RICHARDS: When you came back to New York, you came without him, I believe.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, I came with the children.

MS. RICHARDS: And you were still living on 23rd then, or did you -

MS. FRANK: I'm trying to think where I stayed - at the Chelsea Hotel, so I didn't have a place. No, we gave up the place -

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, of course.

MS. FRANK: - on 23rd, yeah. I had a party after Robert left, and friends painted all the walls with imagery. It was a big costume party, and it was nice. But the people who then took the place said they repainted the walls four times to get rid of the images. [Laughs.] They couldn't get rid of them. They kept on coming through, so like in a [Federico] Fellini [movie], the wall paintings in Rome keep on reappearing. We weren't that good.

MS. RICHARDS: So you didn't get a new place to live until Robert came back?

MS. FRANK: I'm trying to figure it out, also, where we did move. I think Wolf Kahn told us about this.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, you were friends with Wolf Kahn and his wife?

MS. FRANK: Emily, I was in school with Emily, actually, which I don't remember, but she does, Music & Art, and, yeah, we got these two lofts on Third Avenue in a pre-Civil War building, facing east and west. So east was facing Third Avenue. They were in the process of taking the El [elevated train] down.

MS. RICHARDS: So you were on the west side of Third Avenue.

MS. FRANK: On the west side of Third.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember the address?

MS. FRANK: Yes, 34 Third Avenue, I'm pretty sure. It's gone, because it was a big building; it was most of the block there, but the back faced the building where [Willem] de Kooning was. He was on 10th Street, but his building went like that, and ours, you know - so we saw him sweeping a lot. He kept his studio immaculate, and then he was out on the street.

It was Third Avenue; it was just the end of the Bowery, the beginning of Third Avenue. It was the same thing. It was full of bums, called alcoholics now. Anyhow, they were often wedged in the doorway. You couldn't even get out, and I think they frightened the kids a lot because they can't look up. People who, when they're drunk, their head is always down like this, and then they see children or dogs, anything that's down, smaller, and they respond to them in various ways.

But Alfred Leslie was next door, and we were friends. We did a lot of stuff with him. I mean, later Robert had a big fight with him, which - he had fights with so many people over Pull My Daisy [1959; short film by Robert Frank, Jack Kerouac, and others]. I don't know if you know anything about it.

MS. RICHARDS: I've seen it many times.

MS. FRANK: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: I don't know about the conflicts.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, and so we were surrounded by artists, and I think a number of them thought it was odd, I was still doing figures and horses. Sometimes I would say -

MS. RICHARDS: Well, that was the height of Abstract Expressionism.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, "How can you be, yeah, doing that?" Which I thought was a really odd thing to say.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there anyone else who you felt was-

MS. FRANK: Sympathetic?

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. FRANK: Well, I mean, actually, de Kooning seemed sympathetic. I didn't know him very well, but I did know him some. And once he saw me on the street. He sort of yelled out, "Mary, did you ever have a Longview?" or

something, some kind of fellowship.

I didn't know what he was talking about. I said, no, and then two months later I got it. So obviously, he gave my name. I'm trying to think of people. There's so many people, Milton Resnick, [Pat] Passlof, Dick Bellamy, Bob DeNiro [painter Robert DeNiro, Sr.].

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, Passlof.

MS. FRANK: And I think I got the first show I had because somebody wasn't ready for a show at Poindexter [Gallery, closed 1978]. And it was a two-person show, but we each had a big room.

MS. RICHARDS: Who was the other artist?

MS. FRANK: See, I can't remember his name. It was a man, and I can't remember now if he was a sculptor, or not. And I showed wood pieces, some little bronzes and drawings.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you know Reuben Kadish?

MS. FRANK: I did, very little bit.

MS. RICHARDS: He was on 10th Street or Ninth Street.

MS. FRANK: Yes, everybody, I mean, they were all there.

MS. RICHARDS: And worked with clay.

MS. FRANK: It was just a beehive. Yeah, I didn't like his work. It looked like food.

MS. RICHARDS: Gopy [ph].

MS. FRANK: Yeah, it was overworked or something. He had a Fulbright [fellowship], right?

MS. RICHARDS: I don't know. I think you're right.

So that show in '58 must have been very important, your first professional exhibition in New York [City].

MS. FRANK: Well, it was also very strange, because I wasn't looking to have a show.

MS. RICHARDS: Because you didn't feel ready, or because you -

MS. FRANK: I wasn't thinking about having a show. I was just working. And Pat Passlof, I think, came to me and said - I don't know that she liked my work; I sort of doubt it, but she said, "Someone who was supposed to have a show isn't ready. Do you want to have one?" I mean, that's how it was. It was just like somebody offered me some -

[Cross talk.]

MS. RICHARDS: Was she showing in the gallery? Is that why she had the -

MS. FRANK: I don't know if she showed at Poindexter. But it seems to me she was the person who said it. So maybe she knew the other artist. I'm sorry, I can't think of his name.

MS. RICHARDS: And how did that - how did you feel about that show? Was it, in fact, important, exciting?

MS. FRANK: I think it was. I think the thing was that I wasn't looking to have a show, was a very real element, you know? So then I had one, and that was - it was nice. I mean, I don't really know what people thought of it. I don't know if I could know now what I thought of it.

It's what I was doing at the time, certainly. Some of the wood pieces were - what do you call it - creosote wood, very bad stuff to work with, but I didn't know that, and charcoal drawings probably, maybe some ink ones. It just seemed totally different than having shows later, in some way.

MS. RICHARDS: You didn't come into it with any expectations, because you hadn't been anticipating it.

MS. FRANK: No, no. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And skipping a couple of years, you had your first solo show in 1961.

MS. FRANK: At Stephen Radich Gallery.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, and how did that come to be? Was that also on 10th Street? No, that was up on Madison.

MS. FRANK: He was on Madison Avenue, yeah. Now, [Stephen] Radich was an interesting man, really. He didn't believe that women could be good painters, but he thought they could be sculptors. He was gay. He had been married. He had somehow owned the [Auguste] Rodin [Iris, Messenger of the Gods, 1895], that incredible - you know the piece, right? He had one of the bronzes of that.

MS. RICHARDS: There were a number of each, yeah.

MS. FRANK: Even so, to own, particularly that piece, which is one of the most amazing pieces, I think. I made a woodcarving sort of based on it, not very good. I always thought that piece was very extraordinary, and he owned some beautiful [Alexander] Calder's. He was a gentlemanly gallerist. I think if someone wanted to buy something, maybe he would sell it to them.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you know Dick Bellamy in his early years as a gallerist? He was supposed to have been sort of similar, in a way, not as a gentlemanly but not a hard sell, for sure.

MS. FRANK: No, not a hard sell, but he was so complicated and secretive and strange that who knows who Dick - I mean, I think he had many things.

MS. RICHARDS: So Stephen, did he, in fact, sell your work?

MS. FRANK: Did he? Very little, I think. I don't think that was -

MS. RICHARDS: At that point in time, did you imagine that you were going to support yourself as an artist?

MS. FRANK: No, because I didn't. I mean, I did only later. No, and it never seemed to me a likely idea. My mother never made money. She showed quite a lot, even though it wasn't a great gallery.

MS. RICHARDS: But did you feel, in general, happy with that exhibition?

MS. FRANK: At Stephen Radich?

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. FRANK: Yes, I think that I had [a] much stronger feeling about how a body of work could be.

MS. RICHARDS: And you subsequently showed with him?

MS. FRANK: I showed with him for a number of years, and he did the shows very beautifully, I mean, drawings, sculpture.

He had a good feeling about that. I think he really loved my work, because he's dead now, and I'm really sad. The last show I had at D.C. Moore [Gallery, NY], he came at least twice, and he was not well then. And he would come to Zabriskie [Gallery, NY]. I showed 26 years with Virginia [Zabriskie], and I think he always came to the shows. Occasionally we used to go dancing, early on. He was a good dancer, did the twist.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you say how you ended up -

MS. FRANK: With Radich?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. FRANK: I think, I don't know. He must have - I didn't go looking for galleries. So he must have come to me somehow.

MS. RICHARDS: You didn't go looking because you didn't feel you were ready, or because you didn't know how to do that?

MS. FRANK: Well, a combination, or I wasn't somehow thinking of that. I was just thinking about working. I can't really answer that well, which seems odd in a way, but I just - I don't know if something will come to me more.

MS. RICHARDS: But you were satisfied with the relationship, because you showed a couple more times there, one-person shows.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, because I wasn't expecting to make money. And I guess one time I got a very big review,

Hilton Kramer.

MS. RICHARDS: During those years your circle of friends had broadened. Who were important artists or other friends in the early '60s?

MS. FRANK: Well, I think Marjorie was very important.

MS. RICHARDS: Israel?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, and I didn't see her a lot, but when we saw each other, then it was very intense, and maybe it was, sort of, for the whole day or something. And I would go to her studio, which I found miraculous, and she came sometimes. And we also went to big dances in Harlem, at a big ballroom up there, sometimes.

MS. RICHARDS: Just the two of you?

MS. FRANK: No. I think Robert came, although he never danced, and Marvin [Israel] did dance, and maybe went with more people than that. And there were terrific dancers, because there were families that had tables, and they brought their fried chicken with them and their - yeah, and children would be sleeping on the table, and one of them was a big - one of them was astounding.

It was a big - maybe he was Trinidadian or something - for Mardi Gras, and there was a big contest for costumes. And there were 12 women, big women, in green tights or part green and then purple, and they were tulips, and at one point it seemed like that whole group had won a prize.

But [laughs] then something got screwed up and they didn't, and all these women attacked the emcee. And I thought they were really going to kill him, because they were so angry and so disappointed, and they were just big and strong and very, very angry. They were wonderful.

MS. RICHARDS: It sounds like a strong visual memory.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, and there was a man who was "War and Peace." And one side of his body was sort of angelic with a very big wing that extended way beyond his arm, and the other side was sort of skeleton, devil, bad, bad stuff. And so depending on how he stood, you could see one or the other, and how he moved, or then you would see both, and I remember thinking, what a brilliant costume.

MS. RICHARDS: That was a Mardi Gras event?

MS. FRANK: I think so.

MS. RICHARDS: At that point, you were - I think you'd started to make monoprints. Did something in particular inspire you to do that?

MS. FRANK: I didn't know what a monoprint was. I was painting on glass, sometimes with gold leaf.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, this is way back in the '60s when you were painting on glass?

MS. FRANK: See, I don't have dates. I'm sure it was, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, I know you did monoprints later in the '70s, but you also did some monoprints earlier. Did you do other printmaking? I couldn't find -

MS. FRANK: Not a lot. I did some, but I know exactly where that came from, because I didn't know what a monoprint was, and I was painting on glass, and the glass slipped out of my hand or something and broke. It came down - you know how sometimes glass breaks in very dynamic, got these big diagonal swoops, right.

I mean, glass breaks all different ways, but sometimes it doesn't break into lots of little horrible pieces. You get these terrific shards. So I was on the floor, and I was mad because it broke, and it broke with the paint side up. I mean, all the pieces were paint side up, and all of a sudden I -

MS. RICHARDS: Was this something you were using as a palette?

MS. FRANK: No, no, no I was painting on glass.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, I'm sorry, you said that.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, yeah, I don't even remember what it was, maybe slightly landscape or something. I don't think it was a figure. So there were these pieces, not too far away from each other, with the paint on them, and I just thought, I have rice paper; I'll take a piece and put it down on these pieces and rub and see if I can get

anything off.

So then a student came, saw that, and he said, "Oh, a monoprint." I said, "What's that," and then I got introduced to [Edgar] Degas monoprints.

[Side conversation.]

MS. RICHARDS: I think I noticed in 1969 you started working with clay. Now, maybe that's not exactly right, but somewhere I saw that reference.

MS. FRANK: Was it that late?

MS. RICHARDS: Maybe full-steam working with clay.

MS. FRANK: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And I wondered what prompted that very, very important development.

MS. FRANK: I had been – you know, I had been working wax quite a lot.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. FRANK: Most of that stuff is gone because they melted or whatever in moving around.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, were you working with wax when you were working with wood and plaster, all three at the same time?

MS. FRANK: Not wood, I wasn't working with wax then, I don't think. I don't know. Some of these things cross over, and then they don't work at all; then I start – so I can't answer. I really can't answer that. But what I'm trying to think is if I knew Marjorie when I started working in clay.

It seems to me that I did. I think she would have been a big influence, because that was her – I mean, she worked with many, many things, but that was her prime medium. I wonder if you can find things on the Internet. I have some catalogues, if I can find them.

I don't remember that as being – I mean, I loved her work, but I don't remember that as being an impetus. So I can't exactly say.

MS. RICHARDS: You talked about the importance of the works you saw at the Museum of Natural History as well as at the Metropolitan, the Egyptian and many other cultures that used clay.

MS. FRANK: Oh, yeah, always, but I didn't use clay myself.

MS. RICHARDS: Right, but at that point –

MS. FRANK: And I had no – I never took one clay class, where you make an ashtray or something, you know what I mean? So I know I found it very difficult, and I know who was very influential: Jeff Schlanger.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you spell his last name?

MS. FRANK: S-C-H-L-A-N-G-E-R, very interesting person, artist, and he was teaching at the Y.

MS. RICHARDS: Which Y?

MS. FRANK: YMHA [Young Men's Hebrew Association], uptown.

MS. RICHARDS: West, I mean, on East –

MS. FRANK: East side, yeah, and he had a student who I think was a friend of Pablo's, and when they were – Jeff had them making, kind of, city landscape, whatever, on the floor with clay, a bunch of people on the floor working together, and when they were –

MS. RICHARDS: These were young adults?

MS. FRANK: Not necessarily. That boy was young, but I'm not sure. He said to Jeff, he said, "Oh, this looks like my friend's mother, Mary Frank."

"This looks like one of her things," or something, and Jeff, who knew my work and liked it very much, said, "Oh

you know her?" And he came to see me and told me that story, which was why he came, and we became close. And we drew a lot together.

We went places, zoos, places where I liked to draw and different things, and his story was interesting to me. And he was a very wonderful potter and sculptor with very specific, ferocious ideas, definitions about himself and the art world, which he was very against, and galleries, which he was mostly against, and very political.

He made 80 or 90 masks in clay, not to use, but some of them were small, and some of them were very big, and he mounted them –

MS. RICHARDS: Just to clarify for the recording, so some were lifelike in size, and some three, two feet across.

MS. FRANK: At least, and some smaller than life. And they were all in reference to – in Chile when they, what's his name, the singer [Victor Jara], famous singer who they killed? They shot him, made him play in a vast auditorium when they took over, with the help of the CIA.

So I forget exactly when that was, but that's quite a long time ago. He titled it the name of the auditorium. And then he had some money from his family, and he shipped those around different places, which was no small thing to do.

MS. RICHARDS: Those masks.

MS. FRANK: Just to pack and ship heavy, big clay pieces but also delicate, and showed them, and I forget exactly where, but different places and around the country.

[Side conversation.]

MS. RICHARDS: So he was the one who inspired you, or suggested to you that you work in clay?

MS. FRANK: No, I was already working. No, I was working in clay, which was why this student said to him, oh, it looks like my friend's mother's studio. And then I think he helped me. I found clay very, very difficult, because I'd been working in wax, and I thought it might be similar, and it's not at all similar. You ever work in clay?

MS. RICHARDS: A little bit, not much.

MS. FRANK: You ever work in wax?

MS. RICHARDS: No.

MS. FRANK: Well, wax is all to do with temperature and not water, of course, and clay is to do with temperature in a way also but dry or wet, always that balancing of what you can do when it's wet and what you can do when it's not so wet and putting things together. And Jeff S. really worked in a studio some. He came to my studio. We did some – I mean, we didn't make pieces together. We just sort of worked around each other.

MS. RICHARDS: At that point, did you still live on Third Avenue?

MS. FRANK: No, I lived on 86th Street then.

MS. RICHARDS: West 86th?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, The Belnord.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, what made you move from Third Avenue way up to West 86th?

MS. FRANK: I'm trying to remember what. Were they tearing down the building? They did tear down the building, but I don't think that was why we moved. I really don't know. Somebody knew about that place there. It was – do you know The Belnord, that building between 86th and 87th?

MS. RICHARDS: It's huge.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: From the photograph I saw, it looked like you had a large studio there.

MS. FRANK: I had a studio on the roof. It was the old carpentry shop and had the water tanks in it, no toilet, and after-hours I had to go up 12 flights of stairs, because you couldn't get the elevator to that place, and come in through the window. But –

MS. RICHARDS: It looked good.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, it was \$35, absolutely unheard of, because they weren't using the space.

MS. RICHARDS: So you lived in the building?

MS. FRANK: I lived in the building on the second floor, and during regular hours and not on the weekends I could get - the service elevator went up there, yeah. Yeah, it was a very strange place because it felt hermetic, because you saw - you know, The Belnord is like this, with a big courtyard, right?

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. FRANK: So I was on top. You saw sky and the edge, the other side of the edge of the building, but you didn't see anything else. Somehow I don't remember seeing other buildings sticking up. It seems odd now. You'd think you would. But I don't think so. So it felt like no place -

MS. RICHARDS: Was it difficult to live all the way up there when most of the art world was living downtown, in terms of friends and seeing art?

MS. FRANK: I don't remember that. Maybe it was. I didn't like being uptown. What I would have liked, now probably even more than then, would have been Central Park.

MS. RICHARDS: So that was some time in the '60s you were living there.

MS. FRANK: I lived there until I left in 1970, '69.

MS. RICHARDS: You left - you mean -

MS. FRANK: I left Robert.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, you separated, divorced.

MS. FRANK: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Where did you go? What was the first place you lived afterward, when you left there?

MS. FRANK: Oh, it was awful. I forget his name. He was an artist. He's known. He had a small apartment on West 16th [Street], I think, very grim place, and I got it, and I was supposed to be able to have it for five or six months, and then he came and said he needed it. So I had to get out. I was with a man who was younger than me, and I stayed with him some, but I didn't want to live with him.

MS. RICHARDS: And with two kids, too.

MS. FRANK: Well, the children then were up in Vermont. They weren't - they were at this place called East Hill, a very particular, strange place. It was a farm, a working farm, and in the summer - the man who ran it had a retarded son.

He had two children. One was retarded, and the state said he had to be - he couldn't stay at home. He had to be at some institution. He said no. He said, I will make an institution, and so he made the "farm school."

MS. RICHARDS: So it was at a boarding school then?

MS. FRANK: Well, it was a boarding school, but there were only 12 students or something.

MS. RICHARDS: And that's when your children were teenagers then, 1969?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, Pablo went first, because he was arrested for pot [marijuana] in Central Park, and then we heard about this place, and it was a very bad situation, and so he went there, which was initially very, very good for him.

No, Andrea went first, and then Pablo afterwards. It was like a hothouse. There were very good things, but when it was bad was awful, because it was so incestuous.

The man was - he was really ecologically remarkable. He was way ahead, way ahead of everything. They didn't make any garbage. I don't think they butchered any animals, but they ate everything - they grew everything. And they had animals. And there were some very nice people teaching, but it was hardly a school.

MS. RICHARDS: So when you were in New York, you weren't looking for a place to live for all three of you, just

you.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, and then I got - what happened was I got very sick with, what's it called, I can't remember, something quite bad. Pancreatitis. Anyhow, I was in the hospital, and I didn't know that Diane came to see me, Diane Arbus, but she knew I was in the hospital.

She knew I left Robert, and when I came out of there, I really didn't have any place - and she got me a place in Westbeth, which was really amazing, because it wasn't easy to do. I mean, she had a place there, but she just - I don't know what she did to get it.

MS. RICHARDS: What room number or apartment number?

MS. FRANK: Six-eleven.

MS. RICHARDS: Sixth floor?

MS. FRANK: Six F, D or whatever, yeah, facing south, south and into the courtyard.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. You felt that was very - a stroke of luck, then, at that point?

MS. FRANK: Well, it was incredible, because when I came out of the hospital, I was really a mess. I was very weak and everything, and I -

MS. RICHARDS: And it gave you a community, as well, if you wanted to have one.

MS. FRANK: Yes, it did, yeah. I had a very good friend there, Gwen Fabricant. Do you know her? A very good painter, very, not known, she's my age, working all her life. She did have shows years ago but not now, very interesting painter.

MS. RICHARDS: I'll look it up.

MS. FRANK: I have one here, a little one. And Joe [Joseph] Chaikin, you know him, who he was? Great director, actor of The Open Theater.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, yes, I was thinking in the context of art.

MS. FRANK: And Shami Chaikin and his sister, an actress, and all kinds of people. Yeah, there were many very good things about it.

MS. RICHARDS: And did you have a studio, then, in your room there, your apartment?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, there was a studio.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. FRANK: I slept downstairs.

MS. RICHARDS: Because it was a duplex - yeah.

MS. FRANK: I did have a studio.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. FRANK: And I was working in clay, all the time I was working.

MS. RICHARDS: And what about a kiln?

MS. FRANK: I never had a kiln, and people would come there, and they would be looking around for it, and they said, "Where is it? I don't see it." And I said, "There isn't one," and they'd just look completely crazy, because they had come up the elevator and walked the hallway like this.

I was about as far as you can get from the elevator unless you go the other way to the other elevator. In other words, I was far away, and there were always kids on skates and baby carriages and kids playing in the halls.

MS. RICHARDS: It's a vast place.

MS. FRANK: And I moved everything down 23 steps. It was like packing to get ready for Napoleon's entry into Egypt or something. I would pack for weeks and get everything into a truck, just hair-raising getting to the

elevator, into the elevator, and down, and then the truck, and then go to LaGuardia Place, and then go down a bunch of stairs, more. These were the big pieces.

MS. RICHARDS: And what was the name of that place in LaGuardia Place? It used to be there until recently.

MS. FRANK: Yes, Baldwin, Baldwin Pottery, and that's where I fired for years, until I moved here, and I had a big kiln here.

MS. RICHARDS: What year was that you moved here?

MS. FRANK: I think '80 or '79 or something like that.

MS. RICHARDS: But I read that, before that, in, I think '73, when you bought a house in the country, you had your own kiln up there. Of course, that's not going to help you when you work down here.

MS. FRANK: I did, yes. I had two kilns, one here and one there, and they're both gone. Well, I don't even live in that same place anymore. I sold them both, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: So you've managed to live in Westbeth but do your firing on LaGuardia Place.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, and it's true that if I'd ever been like a normal person who had a kiln at least somewhere available close by, even anything, I never would have done that, because it was so crazy because the pieces were so delicate. And I really didn't have a lot of breakage, considering.

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you, you've always had a very intuitive approach to your work, and that assumes a great sense of confidence or belief in your touch and what you were doing, just an unquestioning belief, it seems. Where do you think that came from? You don't see it that way?

MS. FRANK: No, I think it's always been a big struggle for me, everything technical particularly, and clay enormously, and it is probably true— I mean, people said to me so much, they said, you know, you didn't go, you never took clay classes or anything like that. And I said, no, and they said, if you had, you wouldn't make these pieces. You'd make something else because they just, you know — and I guess, I don't know, I feel I struggle always with the making of everything, whether it's painting or — I mean, I did learn some things over the years, with clay certainly.

But I didn't feel — I mean, there are people — it's a silly word, a "natural" sculptor, a "natural" something. It seems to come out of them. I don't feel like that at all, maybe some people think so.

MS. RICHARDS: You appear to.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, yeah. No.

MS. RICHARDS: During those years when you were working in the late '60s, early '70s, did you have a strong sense of a struggle being a woman artist in the art world?

MS. FRANK: Well, I tried —

MS. RICHARDS: This is before feminism.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, I went to — I needed a job. I needed to make money badly, and I went to SVA [School of Visual Arts]. And I forget who was there then, but he told me that he didn't believe in women teachers, and I was so shocked. I walked out backwards instead of saying, fuck you, you know? I was just — I couldn't believe it.

Then it turned out he had — the only woman on the faculty then was sort of a crazy couple — that something in realism, all this philosophical bullshit. You know who I mean? They had a gallery for a while.

MS. RICHARDS: That place on Spring Street?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, I think so, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Something realism.

MS. FRANK: Something realism,; I mean, it was just utter garbage, but so he didn't believe in women teachers, but he had a lulu to prove that.

MS. RICHARDS: Aesthetic Realism?

MS. FRANK: Aesthetic Realism, wow! I'm not surprised I forgot, but good for you.

MS. RICHARDS: Walked by that place every time you went to galleries in SoHo. You'd see this weird-

MS. FRANK: Yeah, it was just absolutely -

MS. RICHARDS: You did teach '65 to '70, I think, at the New School [NY].

MS. FRANK: Yes, I did, earlier, I think.

MS. RICHARDS: That was quite an achievement to get a teaching job at that age, as you said, as a woman.

MS. FRANK: It was because I'd never actually been in a college building before.

MS. RICHARDS: And of course, the New School, they didn't require you to have an advanced degree to teach.

MS. FRANK: No, no, no, and I really got it because of the man who ran the school, I guess, Mocsanyi, a Hungarian.

MS. RICHARDS: What was it? How do you spell it?

MS. FRANK: Paul, M-O-C-S-A-N-Y-I, Mocsanyi. He was Hungarian, so the first syllable is accented.

He liked my work a lot, and he liked me, and he was really like an old sort of European. And I was teaching first - I was teaching mostly people who were older than me, and Chaim Gross, arrogant person, was teaching in the next section, which didn't have a real wall. And all women studying with him since 30 years minimum.

MS. RICHARDS: Not that he restricted [the class]; they were just the only people who tolerated him.

MS. FRANK: Tolerated, adored him, probably bought his work, and I think also they were suburbs [suburbanites], I don't know. But anyhow, they talked so loud. It was really so obnoxious. And I went over once, and I just said, you know, "I have a class right here, and we're working from life." They were all drinking coffee, but anyhow, and talking loud. I said, "Can't you keep it down?" They said, "We always do this. This is what we've been doing for 25 years. Why should we stop?" I couldn't -

MS. RICHARDS: You said you were working from the figure in your class. Did you join with groups of other artists to draw from the model, just on your own during those years, or hire a model?

MS. FRANK: I don't remember if I did. It seems to me I must have. I don't have an absolute memory of it.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, we talked about your going to the Cape, and I was asking how that happened. And I know I read that you drew people on the beach, and obviously, it's a nice place.

MS. FRANK: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that around the same, the '60s also, that you went to the Cape?

MS. FRANK: I went to the Cape for many years, Provincetown [MA], very early on, just get, like, a room there or something.

MS. RICHARDS: Before you knew Robert or after your marriage, the two of you?

MS. FRANK: No, no, after, and he would be mostly in the city, but he would be up there, too, or up there some of the time, and then we got little different shacks.

MS. RICHARDS: You felt a great need to be out of the city in the summer?

MS. FRANK: Well, it was very nice and for the children, certainly, and to be by the water is fantastic. Yeah, I felt I learned so much from drawing on the beach.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you know - we've gotten to when you were at Westbeth after you divorced Robert, but I wanted to go back and just ask a couple quick questions about when you were married and the issues of having two artists working. Did you discuss each other's work at all?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, I mean, everything was - we lived very chaotically in every way, but he was supportive of my work. He was not supportive of me as a mother at all because he really didn't - I mean, he used to say, "I hate families."

MS. RICHARDS: So it wasn't that he wasn't supportive of you as a mother. He didn't want to be a father. Is that what you mean?

MS. FRANK: No, no, well, that's also true, but no, he was not supportive of me as a mother with the children. He thought it was okay to leave the children alone. I was like, Robert, they're little. There was no - you know, we were both running away from being parents a lot, a lot.

MS. RICHARDS: Did your mother or your grandparents help you in that regard?

MS. FRANK: Not my grandparents. My mother did help me, yeah, and she also - she was critical of me, and she was absolutely right, but I couldn't-

MS. RICHARDS: So he was supportive of you as an artist.

MS. FRANK: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And did you feel that there was any kind of an influence, if not about exactly what you were doing, in terms of your approach to your work?

MS. FRANK: Well, I can only think, sort of, really, looking back, in a way - I mean, Robert was, is, whatever, you know, very smart in certain ways but ferociously always in rebellion. So he hated anything that would be analytical, and by that, I don't mean that he was incapable of being analytical, because I don't think that's true.

But it was always that sort of the way he spoke was that freedom and intuition, following your - and I think I was probably very influenced by that, even though the work was so different, because I think somehow either that suited my nature or that's sort of how I was, you know? Is that clear? And obviously, he was a very big influence on me.

MS. RICHARDS: You were struggling through those years, approaching work that was not trendy - it wasn't what other people were doing.

MS. FRANK: No, it really wasn't.

MS. RICHARDS: So that your staying with him -

MS. FRANK: But I wasn't doing it for that reason.

MS. RICHARDS: Right, but you're saying of him, he would be supportive of that.

MS. FRANK: Yes, he was, yeah, yeah, and actually, when I think of it now, I did a lot of really awful work, and he could have been more critical. Actually, he was very critical of lots of things. He was a very critical person.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you see eye to eye about other artists' works?

MS. FRANK: Some, some.

MS. RICHARDS: And did you go to galleries and museums with him? I know he traveled a lot, and he wasn't -

MS. FRANK: Some, not a lot. I think he liked Marjorie's work very much. I think he respected Diane's work. It would have made sense that he would. I'm trying to think of other people. He liked Diane's work. So there were people we did - he liked de Kooning's work way before I did.

I came to de Kooning very late, very late, and I don't know if it's because where we lived, you know, "De Kooning, de Kooning. Bill, Bill." There was such idolatry. It was sort of disgusting. It was disgusting, and I just - I really didn't see it. I adore his work now, and I have since a long time, but I don't think when I first knew it, I did, no.

MS. RICHARDS: During the time we're talking about, coming back to Westbeth, obviously, at some point you were influenced by non-Western cultures.

MS. FRANK: I think way from the beginning.

MS. RICHARDS: Absolutely, from the beginning.

MS. FRANK: I think so. My mother had books of a lot of very good things. I think those were very influential for me. She had Verve [French arts review] -

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, yeah, yes, yes.

MS. FRANK: The table copies of Verve? I have a few, and they had Chinese poetry. They had Indian miniatures. They had African – I mean, they had all kinds of wonderful things besides.

MS. RICHARDS: And all through these years, the '60s and beginning of the '70s, you would revisit the Metropolitan. Do you recall the evolution of these influences? I mean, you were doing figurative work.

But also you – there's one characteristic of your work that I think is quite remarkable: the fact that you insisted, and very successfully, at making your sculptural works be surprising and different from different viewing points. Does that come out of any of these other traditions, or is that something that came to you?

MS. FRANK: It probably does. It's interesting because –

MS. RICHARDS: I mean, you can anticipate what the back of a Rodin is going to look like. But with your work, you could think you could anticipate it, but when you look on the other side, the relationship of the forms and the open spaces, you're almost not sure you're looking at the same piece.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, that's – yeah, it is interesting because it's so hard to know what's intentional, you know, and what's a predilection. I'm very conscious of when I – I was looking at [Pierre] Bonnard once, and all of a sudden I realized he has this predilection for, often the front of the painting where there could be something that could be parallel to the bottom of the painting, but it's not. It's like a little bit off, and it happens over and over, whether it's the bathtub or something else, and it's like a skewed view, in fact, you know, and it's very compelling.

So it's a little bit what you're talking about, and that thing of the other side, I thought often, why should it be like the "et cetera" principle, you know what I mean? Where you have a figure, and you go around the other side, and of course, it's et cetera. That's not how life feels at all to me. It's not just wanting to be surprised.

It's being surprised or being amazed and – was there something else? Well, I'm going to show you, if not today, tomorrow, what I've been working on now, because it's quite strange. I mean, it's photography. I told you that, right? I didn't tell you that?

MS. RICHARDS: Well, this is a good moment to stop for now.

MS. FRANK: Yeah.

[END CD 3.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Mary Frank on January 11, 2010, 139 West 19th Street in New York, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc four.

Mary, we were talking about the early '70s. You had moved to Westbeth; you were working. We talked about how you had to move the works to be fired all the way over to LaGuardia Place.

At that point, living in Westbeth, I know there was a huge community of artists there. As a new resident there, moving to a different part of town and having, sort of, recently divorced, did you feel that there was a community of women artists who were particularly supportive and important to you at that point, either at Westbeth or just in the New York art world?

I wanted to get a sense of how you felt about being a woman working in the New York art world at that moment. Maybe it has nothing to do with living in Westbeth.

MS. FRANK: I have an old friend, Henrietta Mantooth Bagley. She uses Mantooth, which was her grandmother's Indian name. She is part – I forget which tribe now – from Tennessee, I think. And she has always been an important artist friend for me. I don't think I had that, you know – I mean, I am friends with Joan Snyder, but in more recent years. I love her work. Yeah, she is supportive.

MS. RICHARDS: Where did you meet Henrietta?

MS. FRANK: Henrietta lived in Brazil for many years. She had been a journalist first and then became an artist. And she and her husband were both journalists in Venezuela and then Brazil. And both their children were born there and brought up there. They lived there for over 15 years.

And she was very hungry for art stuff. And she came across an ARTnews that had that piece, I think, by Hilton Kramer, with a lot of pictures. And she was very, very taken with it. It was, I think, sculpture, not clay. Well, I am not sure now, but, certainly, drawings were major. She was writing about those.

And then when she moved to New York, some mutual friend mentioned my name. She said she really wanted to meet me. We met. We became very good friends.

So there are certain women whose work, you know, really interests me, but it is not quite what you are talking about, I think, because I was really outside the feminist – Joan was right in the middle of it – Joan Snyder.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that by choice?

MS. FRANK: I don't know if it was – maybe a little choice, but more chance, because I could have had tremendous, serious help, sort of life-saving help, some feminists, if I had known them when my children were younger, or young, period.

I mean, even forget about artists, but just feminists because – I mean, I don't know how much it would have helped, because I was married to someone who didn't think that women should vote. Swiss women didn't vote till very recently. And Robert said that was fine. Why did they need to vote? If I tell people that, which I rarely do, because it doesn't come up, they look at me like I am making it up because they think –

MS. RICHARDS: I know that Swiss women just recently got the vote.

MS. FRANK: But Robert – a Beat, the Beats, this, you know, [Allen] Ginsburg, of course, women – I mean, it is too crazy. I mean, he didn't say that as a joke. He meant it. For what it was worth, he was, as far as I know, completely apolitical. If he became political, you know, after, I don't know about it. But I sort of doubt it.

When I went to demonstrations and things, I went, you know, way back with Pablo, as a baby.

MS. RICHARDS: What kind of demonstrations?

MS. FRANK: All the anti-nuclear, where there – 25 women with their babies in carriages walking across to the UN [United Nations] or whatever. And then later, against the war and a lot of anti-nuclear things, many. They became bigger. And then we were walking by the horrible – the big navy ship that is in the Hudson [River]. And sometimes the demonstrations were a miss.

I mean, I was putting up posters that Irving Petlin made. You know who he is, right? A very good painter, I think, wonderful painter. And he did that poster. It was a famous poster [And Babies, 1969]. It was a big poster, color, and pictures of dead women and children right along the road in Vietnam. You know it. See, lots of people – I am glad you know it. And it said, "Question," and women and children; "Answer," and women and children.

And then Jeff Schlanger made a very good poster that had an American couple standing sort of with their backs to you. But the woman is turning around looking at you, just a very ordinary couple. And then somewhere here, there is a napalm child and maybe just a few words.

So we were putting those up, you know, on Fifth Avenue, on buildings, different places, also on the back of buses. And one time, someone hit me really hard on the head. I mean, it didn't do any damage, but it was sort of shocking. He screamed at me that I was defacing public property. He was going to arrest me, but I didn't get arrested. But I had to sit down for about an hour or two. But I thought that was really fantastic, "defacing public property." What about defacing people? Children? No, no, no, just public property.

There were lots and lots of demonstrations. There were so many.

And I was good friends with Grace Paley, who I loved deeply. And I admired her so, because, besides being a really wonderful writer, she could talk to anyone. She could talk to the police. She could talk to little children. She could talk to enraged Republicans. She just had this ability that was very – she just stayed always who she was. She didn't really change depending on who she was talking to. But she also was able to do it in a way that didn't humiliate them, even if she was very, very against – that is a very special gift.

MS. RICHARDS: So during the years when you were working in Westbeth, you weren't particularly close to early feminism and the women's movement at that time and other women artists who –

MS. FRANK: Not really. Who were there – I have to think who they were. I mean, Grace was certainly a feminist.

MS. RICHARDS: Eleanor Antin wasn't living in – did you know her when she was still in New York?

MS. FRANK: No. I mean, was Ellie [Eleanor] Munro a feminist? Yes and no, not in the way you are talking of. People who were really actively –

MS. RICHARDS: Nancy Spero?

MS. FRANK: I liked her work, and sometimes people made comparisons, certain aspects of our work, which I

could see. But I really hardly knew her. I knew him [Leon Golub] a little more. We were in some good shows together.

MS. RICHARDS: Can you talk about the process of creating the sculpture that you were making at that time? It might be difficult to think back. It has certainly evolved, but at that point in time, your works that you were doing –

MS. FRANK: Talking about the clay?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, you were doing –

MS. FRANK: Big pieces.

MS. RICHARDS: Small pieces, sundial, the larger rainbow woman, the process of creating the images and actually physically making the work.

MS. FRANK: It was extremely difficult, all the large pieces, because – you ever work with clay?

MS. RICHARDS: Not much.

MS. FRANK: It is an astounding medium. But it is so alive and dead, both. So it has this – you know, you can make a ball – take a ball of clay and hollow it out, so it would be like a little bowl, but with a tight opening. I do this with students. You can blow in it. And it will expand a little if there are no holes, right? That is very amazing. It doesn't breathe on its own, but you can breathe into it and change it. In other words, that is how sensitive clay can be to air.

At the same time, if it gets too hard, it just becomes inert, gravity-seeking; gravity, gravity, gravity, always fighting against gravity. So I think I do remember when I started making – I made a number of heads that were, you know, about this size. And then at one point, I remember thinking, well, I can continue and make more of the body in sections. And that was determined partially by I couldn't put a life-size figure in a kiln. First of all, I didn't have any kiln anyhow. And I certainly couldn't have moved a life-size figure. There are life-size figures in clay, certainly. There are Aztec ones. That god who is in the skin of another person, Xipe, you know.

You don't realize at first, until you really look at see this –

MS. RICHARDS: It is an Aztec god?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, X-I-P-E, Xipe. But that is a standing, one-piece – actually fairly simple piece. But it is big. They probably made it and built a kiln around it. I don't know. But I really loved the possibility of having the sections with air in between, space in between. And, in fact, then I could remake a leg eight, nine times until I liked it – different than working on the piece. I mean, you can't keep clay workable forever. You just can't. And I worked, I think, very long on pieces for clay, like a number of months. I was very –

MS. RICHARDS: Just covering with damp cloths?

MS. FRANK: Covering, but not too damp because it can collapse if it is; not too dry - it cracks, all that technical stuff. And people who know much, much more than me about that. But, you know, I was making a structure to hold the slabs that went – sort of the skin on top. But I didn't want to cover the structure, because the structure was sort of like the bones. It was the architecture.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you know at the beginning that you didn't want to be glazing these pieces?

MS. FRANK: I never thought of it. It didn't come up.

MS. RICHARDS: Just never came up.

MS. FRANK: Because I was never a potter. I mean, I made some pots. I took one class at Greenwich House. That was never – I used some oxides. I didn't want them to glaze. I liked the raw clay very much.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you test out different clays?

MS. FRANK: I did some fussing around. Then I came to something, which I think I used for quite a while. I had a formula they made for me at wherever it was.

MS. RICHARDS: The place on LaGuardia –

MS. FRANK: No, no, somewhere else. I forget where, in the Bronx [NY], Queens [NY], or something.

MS. RICHARDS: They delivered giant pieces to you?

MS. FRANK: Pieces? They delivered half a ton of clay.

MS. RICHARDS: A thousand pounds.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, but it is not as much as you think, because clay is very heavy because of the water. And it was pugged [worked and mixed], but it had to be, you know, a lot. Yeah, you would think it is really a lot. If you are really using clay -

MS. RICHARDS: Did you often have drawings, sketchbook images, separate drawings from which you would launch into making a sculptural piece?

MS. FRANK: Yes, but the other way around, too. I made a lot of drawings from clay sculptures. And I had a show ["Persephone Studies"] at the Brooklyn Museum that was about 60 or something prints and drawings and one big clay piece, Persephone, which the Met now owns, but they never show it. It is in storage somewhere.

MS. RICHARDS: That was - I have the date of that show.

MS. FRANK: I can give you the catalogue.

MS. RICHARDS: Nineteen eighty-seven, the Brooklyn Museum show [March 19-June 7, 1987].

MS. FRANK: It was a nice idea. I liked the whole concept. It is amazing how people are stuck on the idea that you draw and then make a painting or a sculpture.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you ever, in those years, found yourself stuck, kind of frozen, having a sense of not knowing what you wanted to do?

MS. FRANK: I am sure. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: And how did you work yourself out of that? It just didn't bother you?

MS. FRANK: No, I am sure it bothered me a lot. But the only way out is to work. I don't know. Go drawing in the zoo, get out, do something.

MS. RICHARDS: So sometimes you had drawings before you began the sculpture, and sometimes you didn't.

MS. FRANK: A lot of time, I didn't.

MS. RICHARDS: And so how did you address - how did you -

MS. FRANK: Because I wasn't working from drawings. I was working, you know, with the material. But I have always drawn, thousands of drawings.

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you about that. I think I read that you have hundreds of sketchbooks.

MS. FRANK: I do. And I have 60 drawers here. I work on paper. So that is ink, charcoal, brush, monoprints, some etching, some lithos, not a lot, but some, and collage and, you know, oil on paper, acrylic on paper, paper, paper, paper. I love paper.

MS. RICHARDS: So in the '70s, as you were working, did you find yourself just going in a very even flow from one piece to the next piece?

MS. FRANK: No, [inaudible] but I worked a lot.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you throw pieces away that didn't work?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, a lot. I threw a lot of stuff away. I could do more.

MS. RICHARDS: Is it important to you to have past works in the studio if you can, as touchstones in some way? Or does it really not matter?

MS. FRANK: Well, it does matter. But I can't have, you know - I can hardly have the things out of the present enough.

MS. RICHARDS: Because of space?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, yeah. It is just, you know -

MS. RICHARDS: In the place of that, can you refer to sketches in your sketchbooks, or to your drawings, if you want to recall some spatial relationships or images?

MS. FRANK: I don't do it much. But I do sometimes look at sketchbooks. Sometimes they are interesting, things that I have written, not necessarily about art, all kinds of things. I mean, also about art. I write more than I realize I do, but it is all in sketchbooks, in between things. It is on drawings, and there are drawings in the writing. I mean, it is a real mixture. I asked you if you knew this man Alvin Chereskin, who wants to publish some of my writings. He likes them a lot.

MS. RICHARDS: In terms of publishing sketchbooks, you know, there are many artists who have done - that have created amazing sketchbooks that wind up in collections and wind up in public institutions that we all love to look at. Do you feel your sketchbooks are so private that you wouldn't want them [on display]?

MS. FRANK: No, no.

MS. RICHARDS: So they could be published? They could be displayed. Have you ever had an exhibition with your sketchbooks?

MS. FRANK: I have shown some. One or two shows, I had, like, a plastic box over a big base. And I had, like, eight sketchbooks open. Then I have scrolls. And I can show you one. It is the old tape that they used for taping plasterboard. The new one is no good for me, good for people who do that. And it was somehow very nice paper, strong, about 20 feet or something this high -

MS. RICHARDS: Three inches.

MS. FRANK: - scrolls and just drew on them, very tiny. And I think I showed one at the Guggenheim once, when I was in that show of - "10 Independents[: An Artist-Initiated Exhibition." Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY, 1972].

I also have done big scrolls - not recently, but I have ones that are like 20 feet and maybe 10 -

MS. RICHARDS: Does that reflect your interest in Chinese painting?

MS. FRANK: I have tremendous interest in it - that, but also, it is just beautiful to work on a scroll, something where you either see part of it, or even if you see the whole thing, but where, you know, something continues over time. I think most ones I have done do not have color, or very little color. They are mostly black and white.

MS. RICHARDS: And they are mostly imagery, or there is text in them also?

MS. FRANK: I don't think there is text in them, maybe a few words.

MS. RICHARDS: Are there other artist sketchbooks you have seen that have been especially important to you?

MS. FRANK: I am sure I have. I can't think who. And I would like to see them. So if you have any -

MS. RICHARDS: Well, there are Picasso's sketchbooks, which are -

MS. FRANK: No, no, I mean people around. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, uh-huh [affirmative].

MS. FRANK: Oh, yeah, his sketchbooks are fantastic.

MS. RICHARDS: Though he didn't write in them too much.

MS. FRANK: But he did write, but not in them. I think his writing maybe was crazy desire, something about the onion - a play, right. I don't think it's very good, awful.

MS. RICHARDS: At some point, you mentioned the importance that Rodin's work and Degas's work had for you. At what point did those two artists become important to you?

MS. FRANK: I have to think way back. But then Degas, of course - when I found out I was doing monoprints, in particular. It was great sculpture. When he died, I think they found hundreds of wax [casts] that were, you know, beyond repair. I mean, we are used to the horses, where you see the armature, right? You just accept it. But it is not how they work. He wouldn't listen to people. I think artists came into a studio and told him, you know, you have to keep them out of the heat or something. It was absolutely -

MS. RICHARDS: So they were destroyed?

MS. FRANK: Well, many were saved. But there must have been a lot more.

MS. RICHARDS: Around the early '70s at some point, you bought a house upstate in Lake Hill [NY]?

MS. FRANK: That is when I first got a kiln.

MS. RICHARDS: Why did you decide to do that?

MS. FRANK: Well, actually, my mother had a place - my aunt had a place in Woodstock [NY]. And they knew of someone who wanted to sell the house. And I did want to get a place.

MS. RICHARDS: So you had visited up there? You said your aunt, and who else?

MS. FRANK: My mother. They both were in Woodstock in the summer.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you go up there frequently?

MS. FRANK: No, I went up there sometimes. And they took care of - my mother took the children sometimes. I didn't go up there a lot. No. And I had mixed feelings about being there. But I did think, well, my mother will be older and sick, and it is better if I am -

MS. RICHARDS: She lived there full time?

MS. FRANK: No, they both lived there in the summer. They both lived in New York in the winter.

MS. RICHARDS: So you started going up there for the summer, the whole summer?

MS. FRANK: No, I mean -

MS. RICHARDS: When you bought the house?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And how did it turn out, having two studios and two workplaces?

MS. FRANK: Luxury of the rich, in a way, right? I mean, I didn't have so much money, but if you have two places, it is very luxurious. I mean, lots of people don't have one.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you find your work was different in each place?

MS. FRANK: No.

MS. RICHARDS: There was a continuity?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, because my influences in the city would be art influences. But I don't draw cars or -

MS. RICHARDS: But in the country, it was more nature.

MS. FRANK: Oh, yeah, very strong. I think nature in the city, too.

MS. RICHARDS: When you bought that house, did it mean that you developed a new circle of friends, artist friends who lived the summer there? Did it expand that part of your life?

MS. FRANK: Yeah. I don't know exactly "expand." But it is true I have strong friendships. Well, Henrietta moved up there after. I mean, she got a place there. She lives in the city. But she was up there quite a bit in the summer. She got a place very near to where I was, then. A tiny, sort of, cabin, and then she built a very big studio. And Alan Siegel, do you know his work?

MS. RICHARDS: I know the chairs.

MS. FRANK: He and his wife, Mamie, became good friends.

MS. RICHARDS: What is his wife's name?

MS. FRANK: Mamie. And she uses the name Spiegel. But she was not making - she was doing ceramics and making ceramics tables that were quite beautiful. But she is not doing that now. She is writing.

And Joan Snyder moved up more recently, although that is quite awhile now, actually. Yeah. And a friend whose work I'm not mostly that interested in, Grace Bakst Wapner, but she is a good friend.

MS. RICHARDS: Wapner?

MS. FRANK: Yeah. W-A-P-N-E-R.

MS. RICHARDS: W-A-P?

MS. FRANK: N-E-R. And a painter who interests me a lot, David Hornung. He runs the Adelphi [University, New York, NY] art department, I think.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you spell his last name?

MS. FRANK: H-O-R-N-U-N-G. The most articulate people about work I have ever, ever heard. And I am sure he is a wonderful teacher. He invited me to his class, and I gave talks and slideshows in Brooklyn when he was teaching there.

And he is very interesting, doing a lot of small gouache paintings that are quite amazing, also oil. Most things are not bigger than this, and some are quite small. Very intense, interesting imagery, very beautifully painted, very personal imagery.

MS. RICHARDS: During that time, would you have wanted to cast these pieces in bronze if you had the money?

MS. FRANK: Well, I did cast some. Almost all of my casting has been done because of Sid Singer. Is that a name you know? You do?

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. He is in the Hamptons now. Same guy?

MS. FRANK: No.

MS. RICHARDS: No, different?

MS. FRANK: He was never in the Hamptons [NY]. He is in Westchester [NY]. And he is a collector of, I think, maybe more sculpture than painting, but he has a lot of paintings, too. And I guess I knew him through Joan. Joan knew him. But I have known him –

MS. RICHARDS: Joan who?

MS. FRANK: Snyder. He has quite a number of her paintings.

He is an odd one. He has helped a lot of artists. He is a macher. He is always making deals. Galleries don't like him because he never wants to buy anything. He wants to make some kind of trade or deal. He has cast a lot of the bronzes I have made. And so then whatever the edition was, he got half.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have a preconceived idea – was it difficult to decide how big an edition would be?

MS. FRANK: No.

MS. RICHARDS: I mean, in theory.

MS. FRANK: No.

MS. RICHARDS: You didn't necessarily cast them all at once?

MS. FRANK: No, probably not the big ones, certainly.

MS. RICHARDS: So did you make a kind of rule about – how big were the editions?

MS. FRANK: I forget. Four, five, six, nothing very large. And I cast quite a lot of little pieces, too. And some pieces translate very well into bronze, and some do not. It is completely mysterious.

MS. RICHARDS: If you were dissatisfied with the way it looked in bronze –

MS. FRANK: There wasn't anything really to do. Sometimes change the patina. That is practically everything you can do.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have a hesitation about making something in bronze, since it is such a traditional

material?

MS. FRANK: So is clay. It can't be more traditional than clay. No, it is just whether it translates well. It's like that thing with [Reuben] Nakian; for me, the plasters were just really breathtaking. And maybe it was the patina, because they were very, very dark. So they had gone from white to almost black. And to me, they looked imprisoned.

MS. RICHARDS: When you had help from Sidney Singer to cast these pieces, was he the person who decided which ones to be cast?

MS. FRANK: Well, there was some he was interested to cast. But sometimes he just asked me, you want to cast some pieces?

MS. RICHARDS: So when he did that, he underwrote the cost of casting, and then you made some kind of deal of what he would get in return.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And so you would be covering the expense of casting, and you would be selling a piece.

MS. FRANK: If I could.

MS. RICHARDS: But he would be taking one as -

MS. FRANK: More than one.

MS. RICHARDS: More than one. So then he would have more to sell.

MS. FRANK: Yes, which I think he did.

MS. RICHARDS: So no wonder the dealer didn't like it. [Laughs.]

MS. FRANK: But they wouldn't offer to do it for me.

MS. RICHARDS: In the '60s, too, you were a visiting artist at Skowhegan [School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, ME]]. That is another summertime activity.

MS. FRANK: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that a positive experience?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, I don't remember a lot. I loved - I thought the place was astounding. Have you been there?

MS. RICHARDS: No.

MS. FRANK: Well, it is quite amazing. I mean, it is way up, and there are these levels, steps and steps and steps and steps and more steps, and more steps down to the sea. So it was very beautiful. And maybe that was the first time I went to Maine. No, I had been to Maine before. But it was very beautiful. I went mushrooming a lot, very good wild mushrooms.

And I took the class out mushroom hunting. And I used to take the class out at Queens [College, NY] mushroom hunting because there were mushrooms on the crazy lawn in Queens.

MS. RICHARDS: Where did you learn about mushrooms?

MS. FRANK: People who know and books and -

MS. RICHARDS: Do you feel you are an expert enough to really pick mushrooms and know what to eat and what to avoid?

MS. FRANK: I am expert enough for the ones I pick. There are millions of mushrooms. I only pick maybe, at most, 15, 16 kinds. That is nothing. I am very, very careful. I mean, it is a very serious business. But it is so beautiful to do it, even if you don't eat any, just looking for them. Do you hunt mushrooms?

MS. RICHARDS: No.

MS. FRANK: When you go, you go with someone who hasn't done it, and move pine needles away because you see a bump, and you pull up this one. You don't see the mushroom at all, if I am right. You just see a bump in

the ground. And then people say, how do you know – where do you – I don't see anything. But what it is is you learn to use your eyes in a totally different way, which is astounding. I mean, it is magic on every level, you know; besides, when I would tell people when I first moved to Woodstock that I picked mushrooms, they would say, hallucinogenic, hallucinogenic? [Inaudible.] I said, no. You know, I said, you get high just looking for them, even if you don't find the ones.

I mean, you are seeing things that change color in an hour, that deliquesce in two hours, that eat themselves. These cannibal – self-cannibalizing – there is nothing there left but a little black puddle. You could just spend your life doing that. But then you don't have time for anything else. But it is so fascinating.

And when you go, then you think, okay, enough now. I am going to go home. I am going to go to the studio. I am going to make supper. I am going to work. Then you say, well, just one more. [Laughs.] I once almost fell off a cliff because – I mean, it does make you very crazy. I didn't have a good stick with me. And I saw a caput oursi – which means "bear's head." It is a white mushroom that has all these teeth that hang down, very, very fine, white, white, white teeth. And it was way up. And I knew it was very good. And I have seen them very rarely. They are both very beautiful and very delicious.

And it was on the edge of a cliff going down to a creek. And it was on a wet – the ground and leaves were wet. And I kept on trying to sharpen a stick on a rock, to get it sharp. But, you know, mushrooms – it is a glue to end all glues, depending on which ones. They are on there, you know. And as I was poking it, poking it, trying to sharpen the stick. I didn't have a knife. And all of a sudden, the stick broke, and I started to fall off the edge of the ravine.

I know that I could have easily died getting mushrooms, because when you are doing it, you are just in this state. It is so exciting, so –

MS. RICHARDS: Wasn't John Cage a mushroom [enthusiast] – did you ever talk to him about it? He didn't live far from here [referring to his NYC apartment].

MS. FRANK: No, I didn't know him. But he was very big mycologist. But I was once in his house because Gwen Fabricant, my friend, was staying in his house, little house in – not far from – New City [NY] or something, what had been a commune years ago.

MS. RICHARDS: It is near Nyack [NY].

MS. FRANK: North of there. It had been a commune of artists and musicians, writers. Stan Vanderbeek had been there, a whole bunch of people. And she was staying there. And I came in. Of course, I knew he was, you know, one of the bigger mushroom people and very well-known for it, including hospital visits and all that. Yeah. The place was very bare, very small, a long, narrow place.

But then I saw that the whole long, narrow wall going along the side was all doors, sliding doors, I think. And I just said, what is behind there? And she said, why don't you look? And I opened one door. Floor-to-ceiling mushroom books. Next door. Floor-to-ceiling mushroom books. An entire – from here past there, mushroom books.

MS. RICHARDS: Twenty feet?

MS. FRANK: More, from all over the world; Russian, of course, a lot, many probably hand-painted. You know, there are famous, old ones. I just looked at a few, but it was, you know, big mushroom library.

MS. RICHARDS: I wonder where that went.

MS. FRANK: Yeah. It went somewhere, I am sure, important because – I mean, it also included all these things about, you know, shamans and hallucinogenics, which they use, and the whole relationship of birch to the hallucinogenic mushrooms, the whole Northern – in other words, Northern Russia, Siberia, Alaska, whatever it is, this whole ring where there are certain hallucinogenic mushrooms that are connected to birch.

MS. RICHARDS: Birch trees.

MS. FRANK: They are not growing on birch. But they are connected in some way to the root or to the cell structures. And people from all those regions, shamans have used those, not that they don't do it in other places. They do. And I know there are a lot of books on it that are connected to religion and –

MS. RICHARDS: Do you still look for mushrooms?

MS. FRANK: We do. Last year wasn't good, but I didn't really go out that much. And the year before was too wet. But sometimes you can have drought in the summer. It is not so uncommon, particularly in August, really

hot, dry, dry, dry, no water, nothing. And everybody is saying, oh, it is going to be shitty, you know, for mushrooms in the fall, although the mushrooms in the summer, too - and then suddenly, it rains in October [inaudible], yes.

[Audio break.]

MS. RICHARDS: In the late '70s, you - maybe this wasn't the only time you experimented, or you did a work, in porcelain. It was kind of an image of a skeletonlike horse. I don't know if that was a unique piece, or there were other works -

MS. FRANK: The horse that is on the cover of Hayden's [Herrera] book?

MS. RICHARDS: I don't think it is on the cover. But I know that it is a piece made of porcelain.

MS. FRANK: Oh, you mean - it is not porcelain, papier-mâché.

MS. RICHARDS: No, there is another one with papier-mâché. But there was one that was made out of porcelain. Well, obviously, it is not important. Porcelain just came and went.

MS. FRANK: It came and went. It is a very ungriving clay. It is the most ungriving.

MS. RICHARDS: When did you meet Peter Schumann? You talked about him. And, I think in 1981, you went to -

MS. FRANK: Yeah, I went up there.

MS. RICHARDS: Went up there, but -

MS. FRANK: Have you been there?

MS. RICHARDS: No, I have never been there.

MS. FRANK: You have to go. He is my age. He is on 15-foot stilts still. He can't be on them forever, I don't think. It is a great experience.

MS. RICHARDS: So tell me how you met him and how his work is meaningful to you.

MS. FRANK: Well, I met him way, way back when he was at the Delancey Street Museum [Red Grooms's studio at 148 Delancey St., New York City].

MS. RICHARDS: I haven't even heard of that.

MS. FRANK: One hundred thirty-two A or B. It was a little room, much smaller than this room. And people would come sit on the floor. And he performed, also Jim Dine, and kind of, Happenings, and Red Grooms. I remember the three.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that before or after he started the Bread and Puppet Theater?

MS. FRANK: I think before, because he was in New York and he didn't have a theater. He was just himself and maybe one other person. But he had all the same ideas. It was a Christmas story, and he had one of those - what do you call when you turn the scenery in sort of a box, like a scroll?

MS. RICHARDS: I don't know what you call it, yeah.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, not a "twinkie," a "squinchy," a funny name, but there is a name for it.

And so that was, like, the background of, you know, Mary on the ass with the baby leaving Egypt, going wherever she was going. She didn't have the baby yet. She was leaving. When is she traveling - with Joseph, I think, actually. I think that is forgotten later, which is always weird to me.

And he had a symbol, and he was the star - symbol. And I forget if there were three wise men. Whatever it was, it was so terrific because it was so simple and essential. So there was one person who was two sticks in front for the animal, right? On the back is Mary, right, walking. Essential. And there must have been other animals. He always has animals. It was very, very simple. It was like the essence, in a way, of everything, because it was already political.

MS. RICHARDS: When you think of your work and what is important to you - and I know animals are important - getting to the essence of these forms is also something that is - that sympathy.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, but he – look what he did. He uses singing. He uses children. He uses humor, which is fantastic. He has these big pageants. It is called the Domestic Resurrection Circus.

MS. RICHARDS: Domestic Resurrection Circus.

MS. FRANK: Yes, and there are children in it. And, of course, then there is the huge audience. It is in what was a gravel pit, so it is an enormous amphitheater, a natural one. And he doesn't use any technology except the brain and talent of all these people. And he has, like, 150 puppeteers.

MS. RICHARDS: Was he inspired at all by Calder's Circus [1926-31]?

MS. FRANK: I don't think so. Calder's Circus is very nice, but what he does is much, much more interesting to me. I mean, Calder's Circus is lovely. If I start to talk about him, there won't be anything else. But you should look him up. There are many – I just got a thing of all his pamphlets that you can get, \$2, \$3, \$1, \$5 posters, books, cheap art. He sells cheap art – \$5.

MS. RICHARDS: I'll look it up.

MS. FRANK: People make these lovely little landscapes. I mean, he is completely outside the art world. And he is a great, great artist in [my] mind, and he is using music, dance, theater, painting, and the most astounding woodcuts. Nobody is doing –

MS. RICHARDS: At what point did you meet him?

MS. FRANK: So I met him then somehow.

MS. RICHARDS: In the '70s or early '80s?

MS. FRANK: No, no, earlier. No, no, '60s. It must have been at least the '60s, if not earlier, a long time ago.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, and he was on Delancey?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, yeah. He wasn't living there, but he was doing something there. I don't know where he was living then. And then I must have seen him more, in different things he did, things at Judson Church. He did things at St. John the Divine because that was the only place big enough for 25-foot puppets. Do you have some idea what he does?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, yes.

MS. FRANK: Oh, you do?

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, yeah, I have seen – a long time ago, I saw it.

MS. FRANK: But to see it up there is a whole other thing, because he is using the forest; he is using the amphitheater; he is using the fields. He is using everything. And then there is jazz in a barn, and then there is the Bread and Puppet Museum. It is an enormous, humongous barn. It is the biggest barn I have ever seen. It is at least three floors. There may be a fourth floor. So there must have been over 100 cows initially in that barn. And that is where they keep all of the puppets from all these years. And then they do productions in the barn. So it is stunning, stunning and very far-reaching. And he is truly radical.

And, you know, I was asked once – I don't know why – for the – what is it called? The "Genius Prize"?

MS. RICHARDS: MacArthur [Fellowship].

MS. FRANK: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: I was thinking about it when you were talking.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, I put his name up. It turned out Aggie [Agnes] Gund has put his name up several times. He never gets it. Horrible and crazy, because they have given it to people who are, you know, politically – I don't get it.

MS. RICHARDS: I don't think it is a political issue.

MS. FRANK: Oh, it is. What is it then?

MS. RICHARDS: I don't know.

MS. FRANK: That is all it could be.

MS. RICHARDS: It seems random sometimes.

MS. FRANK: I think she thought it was, too.

MS. RICHARDS: Going back to your work, you did two pieces – maybe more than I saw – that I thought were quite remarkable, where you used plaster and branches. This was in 1981 – Walking Woman and Running Man.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, they're in my barn in huge crates.

MS. RICHARDS: What prompted you to make those pieces? You were working with clay.

MS. FRANK: Well, I wanted to make something, you know, big with an armature, which is –

MS. RICHARDS: Without having to fire it?

MS. FRANK: Fire. I mean, it is just a very different way to work. I worked on them outside always. It was very ghostly at night because I covered them with plastic, you know, just to keep them from getting soaked when it rained. And then the wind would always blow. And there were these white figures with huge plastic – I mean, they really looked like ghosts. Scared a number of people who came when it was dark. [Laughs.] What is it? You know, you could see the figures under the plastic. The plastic was always blowing, so it made them look really nice.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there something in particular that inspired you to use those materials in that combination to make those figures?

MS. FRANK: I got someone to make me an armature. I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: You didn't continue working with plaster and branches in that way.

MS. FRANK: No, just those two pieces. And they were shown a few times, once in Philadelphia, once somewhere else. I forget where.

MS. RICHARDS: But they have never found a home?

MS. FRANK: No, no. I would like to give them to someone.

MS. RICHARDS: Are they particularly fragile? I mean, why do you think that is?

MS. FRANK: Probably. I mean, they are not more fragile. Lots of stuff now is incredibly fragile, and people don't give a damn. They used to care a lot more. No, I think they are not – I don't know. I think my work is really very much not "what's going on," that sort of thing.

MS. RICHARDS: But besides that, maybe because they stand out as being something different. And people usually want something that is very similar to an artist's work.

MS. FRANK: Probably.

MS. RICHARDS: They don't want something that is kind of an oddity.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, yeah. To me, they don't seem odd. I mean –

MS. RICHARDS: No, one could –

MS. FRANK: No, I know you don't mean odd in that way. I mean, they are very – yeah. You are probably right, though. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: You mentioned Persephone. And I know that was an important piece. There were drawings and – what inspired you to make that work? And what part has mythology played in your work?

MS. FRANK: Well, you know, mythology is just all over the place, I think.

MS. RICHARDS: All over the place in your work or in life?

MS. FRANK: Well, it is all over the place in life, I think, yeah, whether it is spoken about or not. It just is. We know Greek myths maybe more than Chinese myths, probably. Yeah. But mythology has to be ways of dealing with the totally mysterious and chance aspects of life, which are just staggering. I mean, look at –

MS. RICHARDS: As opposed to religion?

MS. FRANK: Well, I think they were religion of whoever, right? I don't know. I don't think there would be a distinction.

MS. RICHARDS: I meant today, continuing -

MS. FRANK: Yeah. But there is no less magic or bizarreness in any organized religion now that we know of, any less than any myth you pick up and toss around, right? But often for me, the names come later, you know. It is not like I decide to make "Persephone." But that is who it seemed to be. But she could have had a different name. She would be the same.

There are certain names that are, you know, in a way, important for me. But -

MS. RICHARDS: And how is that one important?

MS. FRANK: Well, I am sure it was connected with my daughter [Andrea died in an airplane crash at 21 in 1974]. Yeah. But I mean, many people have tragedies. I never wanted - I wanted things to go beyond the personal. There is plenty in the personal. There is no lack of anything in it - and for everybody. But work that I respond to often is very personal, but also goes beyond. And I think that is important to me because otherwise it is not enough. That is what I think. Do you know what I mean?

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm [affirmative]. Are there other myths that have appeared in your work that are particularly important?

MS. FRANK: A lot. Daphne [1975] did, [but] not recently. It is from way back. It was an early bronze, made from waxes, yeah, because I used to work in wax a lot. I don't think there are wood pieces called Daphne. But there are a lot of monoprints.

MS. RICHARDS: What is your fascination with that?

MS. FRANK: Well, I think at the Louvre [Paris, France], when I was very young, when I was living in Paris with Robert and Pablo, I went once a week. It was free at the Louvre. And Robert stayed with Pablo. I didn't go every Wednesday. But I went sometimes, which was - of course, I couldn't know that then. It was a totally different experience than going to any museum now. I think any museum, even the Museum of Insects, which was small, in Paris.

I was alone in the museum. And I was walking around a lot in the Egyptian section, which I was absolutely crazy about. And everything was stone and big spaces. And once in a while, I would hear footsteps of someone else and look around. I didn't see anyone. They were behind some other huge statue or something, you know. It was a little strange. But I loved being alone there, really. I mean, I didn't like being a little scared, but I did love being alone, quiet.

But then I was one time in the Italian Renaissance. And whose painting of Daphne - Apollo and Daphne - a little painting. I don't remember. Maybe it was a [inaudible]. It is not, like, one of the very big painters, but known, certainly, very known. Something about that figure, you know, turning into a tree. Of course, she is imprisoned by the tree. But in my mind and in the painting somehow, that wasn't really the feeling. There was something so extraordinary about these dark green leaves, you know; like, Italian leaves, they are never green. They are black almost, green-black.

And her gesture, turning - I forget exactly how it is. I haven't seen a reproduction of it for years and years. Very little painting. I remember finding it really - I know that was the beginning, that painting -

MS. RICHARDS: Well, your work often merges the figure with nature.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, yeah, because I think it is true. I mean, I think it is real. Just the same way I think nature includes human nature, even though it would be easy to not think so, for all kinds of reasons. But I mean, it is a huge generalization, but still. I once tried to start and make a list of all the words - it is somewhere around - of all the words and phrases - I can't think of any now - "dogleg" - as in a road or "crow's feet," "cat's meow," "hip of the roof."

MS. RICHARDS: "Chicken scratch."

MS. FRANK: Yeah, I mean, there are thousands of them once you start. It just goes on and on. They are everywhere. They are everywhere. And some of them are nasty. So they are all different. They are not charming necessarily. But they are descriptive. And they must be in all languages, probably in Chinese the most.

In China, every brushstroke – you ever see the list of brushstrokes? "Mouse tail," "rat's tail," "hawk's eye," "nails," "lotus leaf," "cat bones," all these are specific. And then the same for the calligraphy – in other words, a Chinese grocery list – you go to the grocery shop and you want to remember what to get, so you write down – when we write one, it is, you know, what it is. But when they write one, it is calligraphy right away, and all of the – every single gesture, stroke is what is used in all the great painting. And the lists are stunning. You should look at them.

[END CD 4.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Mary Frank on January 11, 2010, 139 West 19th Street in New York, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc five.

Yes, I wanted to ask you about a piece you did around the same time – I have '84 to '86 – called Chimera.

MS. FRANK: Chimera.

MS. RICHARDS: Chimera, which was made of papier-mâché.

MS. FRANK: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And how did that piece come into being? Where did the idea come from to use that image and that material?

MS. FRANK: Well, the image, I know in a way more clearly than almost any other piece. My mother had a book of Etruscan art, which I have now. And I used to take art books to bed with me, a bunch of them. I slept – she had this very little place. I had a very tiny room. And she was teaching piano sometimes, not much. She also taught art in the other room. She had a few students who came.

But because of the piano – it was an upright piano – there was no room for a bed also. I mean, a really narrow room. Sort of like this.

MS. RICHARDS: Like six feet?

MS. FRANK: Right, something like that. Anyhow, there absolutely wasn't room for a piano and a bed, so the bed was on top of the piano. So I jumped up on the piano –

MS. RICHARDS: So there was a platform built to hold the bed?

MS. FRANK: No, no platform. It just sat on top of the piano.

MS. RICHARDS: How could you play if the piano was on –

MS. FRANK: An upright piano. Here is the keyboard and here is the top of the piano.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, I see.

MS. FRANK: And the bed was on top.

MS. RICHARDS: There was some kind of thing to hold the bed up beyond the piano?

MS. FRANK: No, no. You know, it is a wide piano. I don't know. It was enough.

MS. RICHARDS: But it's only – it worked.

MS. FRANK: But it did have feet, like empire feet, right? So they hung off the ends, so it looked a little bit flying.

MS. RICHARDS: It doesn't sound like the most stable.

MS. FRANK: It was fine, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah?

MS. FRANK: Yeah. I liked it, really. But that is how small the room was. Anyhow, I always looked at this book of Etruscan work, which had really wonderful – I think it was all sculpture. I don't think there was any of the wall paintings. There were all these tiny figures, that many I saw later in the Louvre. And when I saw them, I thought, oh, my God, they put [Alberto] Giacometti in the Louvre, because he was so influenced by these very skinny, stretched-out figures. They weren't Giacometti, of course. Anyhow – and even things on wheels, bronzes.

There was one with at least two – like a photograph of the whole piece and maybe two details, certainly one. And it was this chimera. And it did have a very different look than everything else. I mean, the Etruscans were around for quite a while. I didn't know at the time it was a piece that some Roman or Italian – not Roman – Italian worked on. I don't think it was [Gian Lorenzo] Bernini. But somebody worked on it, because it must have been in bad shape and probably changed, possibly, you know, quite a bit. There was only one piece like that with this imagery. And then there is one tiny one in the museum in Rome, but just this big.

MS. RICHARDS: Two inches?

MS. FRANK: Maybe three, tiny and sort of rough-looking. And it has the antelope coming outside – you know the image – and the tail – but the tail doesn't become a serpent in the main big one, which isn't really that big. I think it is maybe – I forget how big it is. I don't think it is really huge.

MS. RICHARDS: Four feet?

MS. FRANK: What?

MS. RICHARDS: Four feet?

MS. FRANK: I don't think so. I could look it up. It looks very big, and it is so, sort of, diabolic that it seems big.

And there the tail has a serpent head and attacks the ibex coming out the side of the lion. So there is all this stuff going on. It is one piece, you know, separate parts. Nobody has anything to say about the imagery. I mean, it is called the Chimera. I don't know if that is what it was called then or that was the name given after. There is no reference to this creature anywhere else and no reference to what it was about.

And yet this huge drama is going on. It is an opera, you know. I didn't really like it. I was fascinated by it. But it wasn't to like, because it was so horrible. And then at some point, I didn't know – I have drawings of it, big drawings, you know, charcoal drawings.

MS. RICHARDS: That you did when you lived there?

MS. FRANK: Where? My mother?

MS. RICHARDS: When did you do those big charcoal drawings?

MS. FRANK: Must have done them around the time I did the sculpture.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, I see.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, yeah. No, I wasn't doing anything until after I was studying – dancing. Yeah, yeah. And I wouldn't have done something of that because I was – it made me really uncomfortable. But then I just somehow decided. And then the way I did it was sort of strange, because I got someone to make me an armature with wood and maybe some metal for the papier-mâché. I have also made a few clay ones, small. Maybe one was bigger. I think that is gone. I haven't seen it for a long time. It was a small one, I think, in Leo's [Treitler] room. I could show it to you.

But the papier-mâché one is up there, wrapped in bubble wrap. And it is a piece I really like a lot. I worked on it for a very long time. And there are layers and layers and layers of papier-mâché. But toward the end, there may be eight layers, at least, or 10, of paper that were torn-up monoprints on rice paper. And rice paper is very nice for papier-mâché because it is so thin. But they all had this very beautiful gray. Some had red, but mostly black-gray, and this very nice quality of the paper and the way the ink was on. And they weren't interesting monoprints, so I just, you know, tore them up.

And I do like reusing things, composts. I really do whenever I can. It doesn't always work, but the idea has an appeal, no question.

So I worked on it, worked on it, worked on it very long and kept on changing things and changing the antelope, the angle, the head, and everything. And I never dealt with the tail, because the tail was the worst part, no doubt, because it turns into this serpent. And I mean, it is a tail, but then instead of just the end of the tail, it is a serpent, which is biting the –

So what is going on? I mean, the lion is howling. The ibex is coming out of the side, which seems tender, a structured gesture, but coming out of, sort of, the ribs on the side. And the head is sort of offered up like that. And then this terrible tail comes and attacks the ibex. It doesn't attack the other part of the lion. I don't know. But then I think – I don't know if I remember now, if I felt it while I was working on it, or maybe not until after. It's often a lot of things I think are later. And then I thought, here we are. We have this earth, this planet, which

is so full of possibility and horrors. But we are busy destroying it one way or another.

And that is what that seemed like to me, because it is attacking itself, you know? I mean, even if the self is some other part of self. But still, it is not attacking something over there. I could never get over the fact that – I am not alone – that, as we speak, species are disappearing. I mean, when you were a child – you are younger than me, but still – it didn't occur to me. And I knew or read about animals in different places, here or anywhere, that they are not going to be around, and no one is making new ones.

Well, they are making new germs. I mean, those being – and I feel the same way also about – when I hear that languages are disappearing all the time.

MS. RICHARDS: And seeds, plant seeds. There is a famous – there are repositories.

MS. FRANK: Yes. It is a wonderful thing. All of the people who work with these things. It is wonderful. Places where only three people speak a language anymore, and then they die. Nobody else is going to speak that language ever again.

What is very astounding to me – and I don't know enough about it – but when you think of all the Indian tribes whose language was really beaten out of them. They beat the children who wanted to speak it and forced them not to. That there are so many people who have been able to retain unwritten language. Don't you find that very moving and almost hard to believe? Because I keep on hearing about some other tribe where they are trying to teach children the language. It has that same quality to me.

MS. RICHARDS: Changing subjects just a little bit. Around the same time, you met someone very important in your life.

MS. FRANK: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Can you talk about that?

MS. FRANK: Well, I met Leo Treitler through a friend of mine, a good friend, Linda Asher, who knew him for many, many years and his wife and his children, four children. And she lives on 86th Street, where I had lived, but no longer live, and I was living –

MS. RICHARDS: When did you leave Westbeth?

MS. FRANK: [Nineteen] Eighty, I think, got this place.

MS. RICHARDS: And you moved to this place on 19th?

MS. FRANK: Yeah. And she called and said she was having some people. Would I come? No, because I wanted to hear Tahuantinsuyo, which is a Peruvian –

MS. RICHARDS: Say that again.

MS. FRANK: Tahuantinsuyo. T-A-H-U-A-N-T-I-N-S-U-Y-O, which is some reference to the Andes, a Peruvian, Ecuadorian group of – you know, the flauto, you know, the hand pipes and charango. And I became friends, and I loved that music so much. And so I said, no, I am going to a concert of these people, my friends. And I haven't heard them or seen them for a long time. And she said oh, you never go uptown. You won't go up above – I think she said 14th Street, but that was when I lived in Westbeth, really.

She was still, you know – and she was sort of pissed off. And she said, these people are coming. Sol will be there, Sol Steinberg, who is a friend. And some musicologist eminence, something. I thought he was an 80-year-old man then. He will be 80 next year, but he wasn't 80 then. When I hear about people who are eminent –

MS. RICHARDS: This is 25 years ago.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, I am immediately turned off. It is not a word that I like. It sounds distant to me, you know. Not to you?

MS. RICHARDS: No.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, to me, it does. It is not like saying some great musicologist or something. It has this institutional approval to it. And it didn't sound interesting. And I mean, her parties often had, you know, known people like [Saul] Bellow or [Philip] Roth. I think Roth was maybe there, too, not Bellow. And then she called me back, and she sort of said, "What is this shit? Why don't you come uptown? You know, go listen to them another time." And then I just decided to go.

I thought, maybe she is right. [Laughs.] I never want to go uptown. I don't know what it was. And I went. And I used to play piano, very occasionally, with her husband.

MS. RICHARDS: What was her husband's name?

MS. FRANK: Aaron Asher. He was actually Roth's editor, and he was editor for a lot of writers. He died last year.

And so when I came in, I went over to him. You know, I was a little uncomfortable, having decided to come there. And I said, "Do you want to play a little four-hand music?" I don't play well at all. I am really not - and he said, "No, play with him." He plays. He points to Leo. And Leo sort of smiled, I think, and said, you know, "What do you want to play?"

And I think it was [Johannes] Brahms, the Hungarian Dances, which are very difficult, or the waltzes. And so I said, okay. And he said, you know, "Top or bottom," right? And I said, "Top, always." I never played the bottom. He thought it was very funny. And we played. It made me very nervous. But it was sort of fun.

And then we talked the rest of the evening. He made it very clear to me he was very married with four children. And then he went to Chicago, I think. And then when he came back, we went to a concert with a wonderful singer who died of AIDS [Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome]. I can't think of his name now. That was nice.

And then we became lovers. But he made it very clear he wasn't - he didn't have any intention of leaving. Then - his wife was in Sweden then. She is part Swedish, and she has a house in Sweden. She has a few houses all over the place. But she was always going to Sweden a lot. He had been living in Sweden and working there, connected with [Stony Brook] University medieval music program. And then he sort of suddenly said, "Why don't you meet me in Paris?"

MS. RICHARDS: He would be coming from Sweden?

MS. FRANK: He had come from Sweden. He was living - first of all, he lived out in Stony Brook [NY]. He was teaching at the university there. I don't know if he was running the music department, something like that. And I mean, he offered - it was his offer that I should meet him in Paris. We should have some time together there.

Now, he wasn't working in Paris then, I don't think. Or was he? I can't really remember. But anyhow, I did meet him in Paris. And then he said he had to go back to Sweden. And then he would come to New York, and then we would be together. That is not what happened. He went back to his wife, who had been, I think, pulling away for years, taken off her ring, changed her name, did all kinds of things that she claimed she hadn't done.

MS. RICHARDS: Lived on the other side of the world, practically.

MS. FRANK: That, too. But all together, you know. And I think he really loved her. Although, everything I know of her, it seems like the most unlikely mix, but whoever knows about that? And anyhow, he switched and went back to her. And I thought, that is it. And a number of my friend told me I am really crazy. This man is very married, as I said myself, and deeply - a father committed and everything, and was married for 30 years, and is not going to give that up, even if a lot of it is not good.

And all the children were gone except Max - sort of gone anyhow. And the oldest son, schizophrenic, who is doing phenomenally now, unbelievable. He is on some really good new drug and a really good psychiatrist. Unbelievable change. I have never seen anything like that.

Anyhow, whatever it was, then in the fall or something, then he left, and we're together.

MS. RICHARDS: He left her and came back to New York?

MS. FRANK: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: That was 25 -

MS. FRANK: Something, yeah. It was a big chunk of time or certainly seemed enormous when it didn't seem like it was going to happen. And he wouldn't even contact me. I went to Japan, and I was waiting to get to a city where I could telephone him. And when I would telephone him, he would hardly talk to me. He said he was working on a [Wolfgang Amadeus] Mozart piece, he couldn't talk. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: So you bought this place by yourself on 19th Street?

MS. FRANK: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And you have lived here ever since. And then when you got together with Leo and married him -

MS. FRANK: Oh, we didn't get married until later, because he couldn't get a divorce. She wouldn't give him a divorce. But we were living together.

MS. RICHARDS: You were living here?

MS. FRANK: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: So you have lived here the whole time? And music was always an important part of your life.

MS. FRANK: Oh, yeah. And it is pretty odd that my father was a musicologist. When I met him - because I never met musicologists. I didn't know any. I didn't expect to, either. And I said, you know, I mentioned my father's name. I don't usually mention it to anyone. I mean, there is no reason to. And he said, oh, Lockspeiser, of course, you know. He wrote the big book on Debussy. So weird. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: So you have been completely dedicated to sculpture, to working in 3-D, I mean, except for - well, I shouldn't say that. Your drawings were incredibly important, as you said, from the very beginning.

MS. FRANK: Prints, monoprints.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, and monoprints.

MS. FRANK: Monoprints is using etching and oil paint all the time, not water.

MS. RICHARDS: But at a certain point, what was it that caused you to make a transition - obviously, I'm sure, not abrupt transition - away from sculpture and toward painting?

MS. FRANK: I think I felt - I think I really needed color, and I needed it more directly than monoprints. Monoprints are wonderful, beautiful medium, interesting and mysterious. But the surface is always the same. Because it's - transfer print. And I wanted something direct. And I think painting has been a huge agony for me, very.

MS. RICHARDS: How so?

MS. FRANK: If I had another 100 years, I would begin to learn something.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think you didn't start sooner because it was so -

MS. FRANK: No, I didn't realize. I didn't know. I just didn't have the need or want to. And it may have been somehow connected with my mother. I think I didn't want to do the same thing, because I had a much, much more successful life than my mother did in art. And she was always very, very proud of me, proud, proud. But I think it had to be difficult, too. It wasn't something she was going to talk about.

One time it came up. I said something about, oh, I was clearing out some drawer, and I came upon, you know, nine or 10 refusals from galleries. People had come to 86th Street. They wanted to come. They said they would come look. I waited three hours. They would never come, didn't call, blah, blah, blah, or they didn't come and referred to an entire wall of clay pieces and said, "When you cast all these, call me." They are referring to, you know, half a million dollars of casting. Clay wasn't - clay was, who knows? It was very difficult.

That was when I left Radich. And then I was in some show somewhere, and Zabriskie called me, Virginia called me.

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you. Let me skip to that. We talked about Poindexter and Radich, but how did you end up with Zabriskie?

MS. FRANK: She called me and - saw work that she liked. I don't know what the work was. It could have been drawings. It could have been clay, I guess. Is that when I first showed clay? I think so. I think I showed plasters, too. Yeah. And then one -

MS. RICHARDS: So at Radich, you just showed wood?

MS. FRANK: Oh, no, drawings, and bronzes.

MS. RICHARDS: But did you leave Radich? Or was he closing?

MS. FRANK: No. Oh, he went to jail because - a very bad story, terrible story. He went to jail because he has a

piece, which looks like nothing now. But they got him because it was a flag that was wrapped around something, desecration of the American flag. And they sent him to jail. It was horrible.

MS. RICHARDS: Some artist's work, and he was sent to jail for just showing it?

MS. FRANK: I can't tell you the details. You could find them out. But I just don't know them. But he wasn't in jail a long time, but it was terrible. And it was terrible for him. I don't think he got the kind of support he should have gotten. He himself was mostly not really political.

MS. RICHARDS: But he was principled.

MS. FRANK: Yeah. Probably when you think of the work that has been done, it is just like -

MS. RICHARDS: So Virginia Zabriskie saw your work. And did you know of her or know her? Were you familiar with the gallery?

MS. FRANK: I am not sure I did.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were thinking of a new gallery, what were you looking for in a gallery? What did you want from a dealer?

MS. FRANK: Just a place to show. I mean, obviously, to sell something. But I wasn't - I didn't have the experience of having sold much. So I didn't have a lot of expectations.

MS. RICHARDS: And you weren't actually actively seeking a new gallery?

MS. FRANK: I was, because I just said I had people - I called people. So I was looking for a gallery.

MS. RICHARDS: Those letters your mother unearthed, and you were talking about how she was going to -

MS. FRANK: I unearthed them when I said that to her. I said, there are all these refusals. I had forgotten how many there were. She said, I couldn't do that. In other words, I couldn't take all those refusals. She wouldn't go and put herself in that position.

MS. RICHARDS: That is a compliment to you that you had the strength to do that.

MS. FRANK: Well, it was. But it also acknowledged how hard it was for her.

MS. RICHARDS: So you were actively looking?

MS. FRANK: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And had you contacted Zabriskie?

MS. FRANK: No, no. She saw work in some group show. I forget where. She contacted me. No, I hadn't contacted her. And then I was with her for 26 years or something. I had a lot of shows. It was also really when I, you know, sold the most and -

MS. RICHARDS: In that relationship, did you - were you involved at all - did you want to be involved in any issues related to your show beyond just bringing the work? Like deciding how to install it, what image would be on the announcement card?

MS. FRANK: Always, always. Yeah, I think I always did.

MS. RICHARDS: The text of the press release, you know, the marketing part.

MS. FRANK: Maybe not that, but always the visual things. Yeah. The truth is, when Leo first met me, he was very struck by how, he thought, unambitious I was and how - I got, you know, elected - yeah, I guess elected - to the American Academy of Arts and Letters [honor society]. And they wrote me a letter saying that. And my first response to that was - and I think I said that to them - I said, "What do I want to do that for?" And it wasn't something against them, since I hardly knew anything about them. I knew it was for artists and writers and musicians. It didn't have meaning for me, really. And I think he said, you are really sort of crazy. If it doesn't take anything away from you, then why wouldn't you want to, you know?

I thought also it was sort of perverse to have that response. And so, of course, I did. And just recently, I found out who put me up for that. It was Sol, Sol Steinberg, and [Isamu] Noguchi. I forget who the other was.

Anyhow, I mean, he belongs to the - what is it called - Arts and Sciences, Humanities, you know -

MS. RICHARDS: There is an equivalent.

MS. FRANK: It is very different. It is much more interesting, because they have talks. They have lunch on Fridays. You know, it is not this, sort of, big, formal, you know, thing that won't take any political position. I have really screamed out at a big thing where people are being, you know, the new people are being announced and people are giving speeches. And I screamed out about the war and asked people to stand up in solidarity. Not that many people stood up. Some people in the audience did.

MS. RICHARDS: Apolitical.

MS. FRANK: What? Oh, no, they are pure, you know. I said, well, yeah, that is nice. I mean, what about if you were in Nazi Germany in 1938 or so? There were intellectual organizations. There were all different things. If you had been in one of those, what would you say if they said, "We can't speak out"?

I remember what's-her-name, the sculptor with that interesting name. She makes the huge wood pieces, which are sort of adzed [sic; made with an adze] or axed. You know, they are abstract, big wood pieces.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, Ursula von Rydingsvard.

MS. FRANK: She was there. And I said, do you want to - you know, I hardly know her to say hello. And she said, oh, no. I was shocked. You don't think it is shocking? I mean, it is rationalized, we don't.

MS. RICHARDS: I don't know. I don't know the context of the meeting that you were -

MS. FRANK: It wasn't a meeting. It was their yearly, when the new people are meeting and speeches -

MS. RICHARDS: Well, maybe people were uncomfortable putting others in an uncomfortable situation. It obviously caused them discomfort. Clearly, the -

MS. FRANK: I think the war causes discomfort.

MS. RICHARDS: Right, but clearly, there was, I would imagine, a pretty complex range of responses that people didn't feel free to express at that moment.

MS. FRANK: When are they going to feel free to express them? That is a very good place to express them, I think. You are not making anyone who doesn't feel that way. But that properness. You know, it is not - what is the word - it's not "appropriate." What about the war? Is the war appropriate? I don't get it. I just don't.

MS. RICHARDS: At Zabriskie, then, you were involved with the installations and the images. So it was - and was it important to you - so, obviously, over those years, you were happy - satisfied with your relationship with that gallery?

MS. FRANK: She is a very difficult woman, but good in many ways, but very difficult. She never would give anyone else in the gallery any say, you know. They worked for her. And she checked on them every minute. But she never - and she was in Paris a lot because she had a gallery in Paris. She was there a lot.

MS. RICHARDS: So she had control over everybody?

MS. FRANK: She had control, but she wouldn't give them any control. She had Suzanne Vanderwoude, who was a wonderful woman. Did you know her?

MS. RICHARDS: No.

MS. FRANK: I think she has Alzheimer's, [disease] a wonderful woman.

MS. RICHARDS: Vanderwoude?

MS. FRANK: Yeah. And she had a gallery, Vanderwoude Tananbaum. She showed interesting work. She showed Jan Muller. She showed Bob Thompson. Maybe Lester Johnson, I am not sure.

MS. RICHARDS: So you stayed there until she closed the gallery?

MS. FRANK: No. I left before. She wasn't selling anything. She became much more involved with photography. Photography and, well, she was one of the first people, really, one of the first galleries, really, that had been, like, a painting gallery, to show a lot of photography. And she had very good people. And I think she did well with it. But I think photography and painting then - and there were different audiences. And so the more she moved to photography, the harder it was for anyone who was painting or sculpting. I think that is true. Or then

my work just wasn't selling. I made \$2,000 one year.

MS. RICHARDS: And you were living on your work, mostly?

MS. FRANK: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it important to you to feel sympathetic or be interested in the work of the other artists showing in the gallery? So if other artists were leaving as the gallery put more emphasis on photography, that also changed the complexion of the group that you were -

MS. FRANK: Wondering if they left. I always liked Pat Adams's work very much, a lot. And she still shows - and then Virginia, of course, moved to Madison 41 [Richards later clarifies that it is 595 Madison Avenue at 57th Street], which she actually said was a terrible move. Of course, she took a much smaller space, really small. But she is still there. She is showing, I think, mostly photography. I was thinking of going and seeing her. Of course, I haven't seen her for a long time.

MS. RICHARDS: So how did you - when you wanted to leave, you started looking for other galleries?

MS. FRANK: It was very painful for me, leaving. I mean, we had a relationship. It was not an easy one. But I think she did appreciate the work a lot. And she knew she wasn't able to do almost anything with it. I mean, she didn't, you know, pretend something else. She had done very well with it.

MS. RICHARDS: Was your primary need from her to sell the work? Or did you also have a sense that she needed to develop your career, create possibilities for museum shows? Were those also things you judged that came from her work?

MS. FRANK: Well, she did get me some museum shows, the one at the Neuberger and the one - I can't think what else. You know, not a lot, but some. But I was in a number of, you know, I think, good group shows. I can't think what they were.

MS. RICHARDS: Sure. I am just not sure how much you felt was her work.

MS. FRANK: Well, I didn't do any work of that kind. Now I try to. I fail, but I try. But I didn't, absolutely at all. And I mean, in some weird way, I don't know if you would call it ambition. But whatever it is, I think about those things more now than I did. I don't know if that is an aspect of a combination of being older or because - I met someone who said they thought I was dead.

MS. RICHARDS: They said you were dead?

MS. FRANK: Yeah. And I thought that was - I mean, I wasn't so surprised that they thought it. I was surprised that they said it. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: You should be surprised. That is an extremely rude remark.

MS. FRANK: It really is. [Laughs.] And then she sort of laughed or something. She was embarrassed.

MS. RICHARDS: She should be. [Laughs.]

MS. FRANK: You know, there are people I am not sure if they are dead, you know. They are older, and I haven't seen them for a long time.

MS. RICHARDS: But you don't -

MS. FRANK: And I haven't, maybe, seen their work, or I am not going around looking, which is something; whatever it is. It is very easy when you are older, and then particularly if you don't live in the city here a lot of the year, for people to think you are, if not dead, sort of disappeared, gone, whatever it is, somewhere else.

MS. RICHARDS: So you said it was painful when you were leaving her. Was she understanding how the gallery had changed and that was - and she hadn't sold your work?

MS. FRANK: She understood that, you know, I couldn't, you know, live on that at all. And it wasn't as if I had money coming in somewhere else, because I wasn't teaching anymore. I taught for I don't know how many years at Queens.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, we'll go back into that. Yeah.

MS. FRANK: Yeah. And then after Andrea died, I could not stand to go back and look at all those girls who

looked like her. They were absolutely her age. It was really -

MS. RICHARDS: So how did you - after Zabriskie, you showed at Midtown Payson a little bit.

MS. FRANK: That is what then became DC Moore [Gallery].

MS. RICHARDS: So were you again talking to lots of galleries and going through that grueling process?

MS. FRANK: Yeah. And then, he claimed -

MS. RICHARDS: He who?

MS. FRANK: Midtown Payson, Mr. Payson, you know, he is, like, Wall Street. Payson - I don't know - they own football fields and football teams and pieces of Wall Street and pieces of whatever, he's a multimillionaire - said - oh, Bridgette and Ed DeLuca. I don't know if you know him. He works at the gallery. He is, like, the second person - had offices there. They were the ones who did the work. He owned the gallery. They did the work. And I had a show, which did, I think, fairly well.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you end up - I guess I missed - how did you end up going with that gallery in the first place?

MS. FRANK: Because they decided to take me. Yeah. And I had two shows there, I think. And then Ed went into work, doors locked. Bridgette went into work, doors locked. No nothing. He just closed up the place, moved to Florida, said he is bankrupt. There are all levels, obviously, of being bankrupt. You can do it with \$100 million or with less. And he took, like, 40 pieces of mine to Florida with him. He took some other people's work, too. He took Cadmus's.

MS. RICHARDS: Paul Cadmus.

MS. FRANK: Who showed there and then showed with DC Moore. And I guess maybe she has the estate. Anyhow, I mean, it was really - it was like - and I didn't even know he took all that work. I didn't know how much work they had in the gallery of mine - they had an enormous amount of work - because I don't keep track of those things. Drawings, sculptures, paintings, prints.

I called him up, and I said, I want my work back. He said, well, we can send your work back, but you owe \$40,000 for framing. I said, "You were supposed to cover framing. You said you would." [He said,] "No, the artist has to cover framing. So when you send the money, then we will send the work." I said, I don't have that money. He said, "Well, then you can give me a piece." And he said the same thing to Cadmus, who he said owed him even more. Cadmus said, "What is your address? I am writing a check out now," because he could afford to do that very well. He said, "I am writing a check; now send me the work back. You are not going to have any piece of mine," you know, which is what I would have liked to do.

And I wasn't interested in vengeance, but I was so horrified that he had just taken that work without saying anything, you know. It was a person who acted very, sort of, morally superior on top of which -

So anyhow, then - I don't know - a year or something later, Bridgette opened the gallery on Fifth Avenue, in the same building Zabriskie had been in, on a different floor. So I was back there.

MS. RICHARDS: You felt back home?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, it was funny.

MS. RICHARDS: And did you finally get your works back from him?

MS. FRANK: I did.

MS. RICHARDS: You just gave him one piece?

MS. FRANK: Yeah. Well, I think I got them all back. But since I never knew how many he had or anything, of course, I would never - I find all that stuff just-

[Audio break.]

- well, partly because, of course, they are looking for young, new people.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, it is really difficult when your gallery closes.

MS. FRANK: Well, my gallery is not closed.

MS. RICHARDS: And they are young, so there is, hopefully, no risk that that will happen.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, but it is difficult.

MS. RICHARDS: To go back to the beginning of painting, I think I read that you were painting on glass and on metal.

MS. FRANK: I painted on glass way before.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, that is how the monoprints started, right?

MS. FRANK: Yeah. And not only monoprints, but I had a whole show with Zabriskie of paintings on glass, you know, behind. But then some had charcoal paintings, charcoal drawings, and paint, and then some had paint also in front. And some were double, painted on both sides. I think it was an interesting show. It was sort of strange.

I mean, Virginia was very good, because she would let me show what I wanted to.

MS. RICHARDS: And did you decide entirely on what the installation - how it would be, or did she - was she a good - did she have a good eye?

MS. FRANK: I think she had a good eye. We didn't have really disagreements. I have had disagreements with DC Moore, not huge ones.

MS. RICHARDS: Did Virginia decide when you would have a show? Did you sort of have a regular schedule? Did you say, you know, I have enough work, so when is the next chance -

MS. FRANK: I think she came down, and I always had enough work. Mostly I had one, I think, sort of every other year. Yeah, I did a lot of work.

MS. RICHARDS: You mentioned that you had stopped teaching. Did you enjoy teaching?

MS. FRANK: I was teaching -

MS. RICHARDS: I know you taught at the New School in drawing and then at Queens College.

MS. FRANK: At Queens, I taught graduate and undergraduate.

MS. RICHARDS: From '70 to '75, five years.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, I was teaching drawing, undergraduate, and sculpture, and some were paintings and whatever they were doing, graduate students.

I enjoyed some of it. I could have had a full-time position. I was offered one and I didn't want it. And I did go to one meeting, and people ended up screaming at me because they said, you know, what do you think this is? An art school? And I would say something, you know -

MS. RICHARDS: Why would they ask you that?

MS. FRANK: I forget what I said. But I didn't understand, in fact. There were almost no women teaching. There were a number of men who all had girlfriends in the class.

MS. RICHARDS: You mean students?

MS. FRANK: Mm-hm [affirmative], not unusual.

I remember going to quit. And there was - I can't think of his name who ran the department. And he was sort of crazy. And he yelled at me in the hallway that because of me, he had to go to an asylum or something. It turned out he went to some asylum every year, anyhow, because he had some kind of breakdown. A very learned man, pompous, insufferable, the way Gabriel Laderman and him - I will think of his name. I don't know if he is still alive.

And some more men, who had been teaching there forever. And as he said to me, the guy whose name I can't think of, "I am married to the school, you know. You should be." I pity your wife, you know. [Laughs.] But there are people who are married to the school, right, and they can't wait for the next meeting. And I went to a meeting. And I was so angry, because it was so - it was all about procedure and grades, just stuff that had nothing to do with teaching art, for me, nothing.

MS. RICHARDS: What was your approach to teaching the students drawing?

MS. FRANK: Well, I always drew in class for one thing, not because I thought they should draw like me, but I thought I could think better, if I was drawing, about drawing the figure, which is a very difficult thing to face, particularly -

MS. RICHARDS: Were most of your classes figure drawings?

MS. FRANK: Life classes.

MS. RICHARDS: Life classes.

MS. FRANK: The undergraduate was, except sometimes I took them to places. This was Queens. A number of Persian Jews, a number of every ethnicity, and lots of them never came to Manhattan, or they only came to Manhattan to go to Bloomingdale's [department store], because that is the first stop, and they could shop. But they didn't go to the Met. They didn't go to Modern. They didn't, you know. And they came - a number of them from very strict families. One girl left the class because her father found out she was drawing someone nude.

Another - I told them to draw themselves nude; since they are working from life, they can practice at home. Even if they have a little mirror, they can do something. And another student got in trouble for that. And then I said, you know, draw your boyfriend or draw whoever you can. And I mean, it was - you know, I hadn't come up against this. I didn't realize this kind of thing. I mean, my mother was an artist. The idea of drawing from nude was so ordinary, normal, not not difficult, but, you know, not something strange and weird and, you know, anti-Christ. [They laugh.]

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. FRANK: So it was an education, certainly. And I wanted them to make books. I said, I want you to bring in a book every week that you make. Then they began making also books. At first, they were horrified. They said, every week a sketchbook? I said yes, yes. And you can leave the eyelashes off, but just keep drawing - and not only figures; draw anything you like, from your heads, from art, from whatever you like. But draw, draw, draw, until it becomes like breathing, because then something interesting will happen. This is not about verisimilitude. It is about seeing what you can do with the material and paper, and become intimate with it.

And then after a while, quite a few of them got very excited. And they began really bringing books in every week full, and leaving out the eyelashes [laughs] and getting to the inside of things. And they began making books. And then they began making very original books. Someone had a scroll on a thing that turned. I don't know how he figured it out. And one used metal and wood. And they ended up making wonderful books. It is interesting.

MS. RICHARDS: How did teaching affect -

MS. FRANK: And then monoprint. I taught monoprint. And then they wanted to cut the class because they said, monoprint, what is it? This is early on. They said, not a print, not a drawing; it is not an etching, you know. And the class must have done something really funny because they managed to get, like, 90 signatures. I didn't have 90 students, you know. And they wrote this thing, you know, that they really wanted it, and they absolutely - and they kept the class. But it was partly fake, because they got people to sign.

MS. RICHARDS: What do you think was the effect on your work of teaching? I mean, aside of having to spend the time.

MS. FRANK: Yeah. I think I would have liked it to have more effect. But I think it probably had some sort of subliminal effect, in a way. But I can't tell you quite what it is. And I think then - I taught in many places as a -

MS. RICHARDS: - visitor.

MS. FRANK: Visiting, a lot of places.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. FRANK: Not recently very much. The last place I went to was Oregon, Portland. I forget. It was somewhere out there. And that was very disappointing. The students were just sort of abominable. It was hard to believe how bad it was.

But sometimes I went places and it was good. I went to Smith [College, Northampton, MA]. I did printing, actually. So I wasn't teaching as such. And they asked, you know - well, of course, there will be students who want to watch. I said, okay, thinking it would be maybe 25 students. I don't know what it was. A staggering

number of students hovering over me. It was quite difficult.

I mean, I think I did, actually, some good work, and they got too much of it. So I have had -

MS. RICHARDS: But after '75, you stopped teaching full-time?

MS. FRANK: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: I mean, not full-time, but a full class.

MS. FRANK: Yeah. But I refused the professorship, because I could never have gone to those meetings. They were so obnoxious. It was basically meetings instead of doing something. You know what I mean?

MS. RICHARDS: Were there any friendships you made with artists who were teaching there?

MS. FRANK: Tom Doyle, who I knew before, who I liked, and someone else. I am trying to think who.

[END CD 5.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards, interviewing Mary Frank on January 11, 2010, at 139 West 19th Street in New York City, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc six.

We were talking about galleries, or teaching, and -

MS. FRANK: I just want to say that I would like to talk about solar cookers and photography. Those are two things. Did we have a talk about solar cookers?

MS. RICHARDS: No, we're going to save room for that.

But talking about - so you evolved into painting, and one of the - I think - significant developments was creating the interactive triptychs. You did a significant body of work of triptychs, so I wanted to ask you to talk about how you came to doing those and how they function and why they're important, separate from, but in addition to, the imagery.

MS. FRANK: Right, they are important to me. Well, I did a painting that covered this wall that was three pieces. So it was -

MS. RICHARDS: At least 12 feet.

MS. FRANK: - yes, it was 11-something. It started - maybe 12. The painting got smaller and smaller, but it ended up being maybe 11, but there were three separate dimensions, a central big one and two on either side, but not equal.

MS. RICHARDS: And I wanted - just a little sub-question before it: you were painting on panels, not on canvas. Why is that?

MS. FRANK: I can't make a triptych with canvas because the back of a triptych -

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, okay. So it was a technical - it wasn't because you liked the hard surface to paint on.

MS. FRANK: I do like hard surface also. And sometimes I like canvas, but I preferred, then, canvas on a hard surface, because I do a lot of things which are sort of like sculpture or something, so I want that resistance.

Anyhow, so I did three different rectangles, and I was putting small paintings, attaching them on - the surface was painted. And I kept on making it smaller, kept on cutting it down. But the two side panels came out at angles, but they didn't close the way a triptych does, but it was a triptych because there was three pieces. But it wasn't a triptych in the sense that a triptych, when it's closed, is half the size of when it's opened, and you have a whole other painting which you can't see inside.

And the Whitney [Museum of American Art, New York, NY] owns that now. The man who bought it gave it to them, but they've never shown it, and it's called What Color Lament?. And it's a painting -

MS. RICHARDS: That's '91 to '93.

MS. FRANK: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: It has many pieces.

MS. FRANK: Pieces on it, but it's three panels. And the two wings come out at slightly – I said this – came out at slightly different angles. And I don't know quite how I came to that, but something about that I didn't want it to be all flat on the wall. I just wanted these wings to come out. But they didn't come out a lot. I don't know what the angle was. And one was shallower than the other. So it was erratic in that way. Certainly not symmetric. And the imagery, a lot, was of, like, people in exile, I mean, maybe specifically refugees, but not ever – it was never literal. And the landscape elements in it and the whole background was very combed, almost like – do you know the painting?

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, I saw pictures of it.

MS. FRANK: Yeah. It's hard to see without a lot of details, objects, because it's big, and there's lots of smaller things. But the whole background is almost of, like, a plowed field, but not plowed the way a field would be, you know –

MS. RICHARDS: You're making weaving gestures.

MS. FRANK: – yeah, sort of, yeah, and gray, gray, blue-gray, kind of like dark gray, sort of, and quite thick, with this combing. And then on top of that sit these small images, which sometimes are integrated with the background and sometimes not. And because there were many more images initially – and that was sort of interesting – I kept on taking them out. There were too many. At one point I had maybe about over 20 images attached. And then it was much too much. I took them off. But where they'd been attached, then, was sort of blank. It wasn't blank raw panel; it was this gray, but sometimes without the plowed – these furrows. So then those empty spaces were important to me. They were these empty spaces, like something where there had been something and no more.

MS. RICHARDS: Which connects to the title What Color Lament?.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, yeah. Which I think is a line from [Pablo] Neruda, because I had it in my head for years. And when you have something in your head for years, you could think it's your own. You know? But I think it's Neruda.

MS. RICHARDS: And that was the first significant triptych.

MS. FRANK: Well, it was, but it was not – it was the only triptych that didn't, in fact, open and close. It was a triptych in, sort of, substance, but not in –

MS. RICHARDS: Did you feel that you were developing a kind of vocabulary – well, before that, too – a kind of vocabulary of images that – like Nancy Spero had done that, too, not necessarily before you, but that could serve you, that you could use to expand from the personal to the universal?

MS. FRANK: I hope so. Yeah, that's – yeah, yeah. It's a presumptuous thing to want to do, but yes – the trees keep on repeating, ground – repeats.

MS. RICHARDS: Figures in certain stances – kneeling, shrouded.

MS. FRANK: – yeah, yeah, basics, sky. Yeah, sort of basics.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were doing these – when you're working, you're obviously working in your sketch books and writing, too – there's a kind of connection, to me, to poetry, using words in a not necessarily rational order, but to create ideas.

MS. FRANK: I didn't use words on the actual paintings.

MS. RICHARDS: No.

MS. FRANK: But the language is certainly very important. It seems to become more and more important. And they are like many of the things are, or like pictograms.

We didn't talk about it at all, but in the clay – and I don't know if you know. I made hundreds of cylinder seals.

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you about the seals. Yes, I felt I didn't have time.

MS. FRANK: Seals and stamps.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. FRANK: And thanks to Babylonia, right, who did them for thousands and thousands of years.

MS. RICHARDS: It's incredible they've survived, although I'm sure that most of them have not.

MS. FRANK: No, but I think most have because – well, most of them are stone, not clay, for one thing. And also clay, when it gets down to a small enough size, survives, in fact, incredibly well. Bigger, it gets broken, but the cylinders are so little, and they're solid. They're uncanny, totally uncanny. What's on them, how are they made, everything about them.

And when they say that the first printing is whatever they say it is, I think is completely wrong, because the first printing is from Mesopotamia. Because if you have a mile of clay, you can print a mile of those images, and they never talk about that.

And it's really just the same as printing with a block, which is in reverse, right? If you want to print art, you have to make it backwards. It's beautiful to print, to push a roller and –

MS. RICHARDS: There's also these panels, and this work has obvious connection to the sculptural works you were making. And it connects – I know that you did a number of theater sets. I didn't touch on that yet. Could you talk about that kind of connection, and also when that comes to the interaction of the panels that moved?

MS. FRANK: Yes, which, I have to say, I really loved when I could see people opening and closing them. And when, at the show at the Neuberger with all the triptychs – the director then, she's not there now – and, you know, the show gets planned way, way before – talk, talk, talk. What's this? What's that? What's going to be in it?

And she said to me, "Mary, are the triptychs going to be closed or opened?" [Laughs.] I said, "You must be kidding. They can't be [only] closed or [only] opened; otherwise I wouldn't paint the whole thing. I'd just do one [side]." And she said, "Oh, we can't have people touching them." I said, "Why can't you?" She said, "Because the insurance will never cover it, never cover it." I said, "Then they won't cover it."

What good is having something that people can open and close if they can't open and close it? And she said, "We can't show things that are uninsured." I said, "Of course you can. I will write you something that it's okay that it's not insured." Nobody's hands are going to be as dirty as mine. And they can open it and close it. Nothing's going to get broken or spoiled. So they did.

MS. RICHARDS: Did they devise, which they could, some kind of plastic, clear plastic?

MS. FRANK: No, no, no, no, no, no. They were made so you could open and close them very easily.

MS. RICHARDS: You could also, like – they have those little handle things at the museum sometimes – you move things with them.

MS. FRANK: No, because it would be –

MS. RICHARDS: So did they, in fact, not insure them?

MS. FRANK: No. Big deal. And it was beautiful, because there were a number in a big room and then another big room, and some people were opening one side. So it wasn't just – there weren't just two ways in seeing it. There were about 15 or 20. It was fully open, half open, quarter open, three-quarters open –

MS. RICHARDS: Left open, right open.

MS. FRANK: Exactly. And so people were looking at what they had opened, and they would turn and look and see some, maybe, connected image of the inside of a different one, or not connected.

MS. RICHARDS: And there are all kinds of connections in these images.

MS. FRANK: Yeah. And, for me, it was exciting to see that.

MS. RICHARDS: It seemed to me, when I was reviewing the triptychs, that you might put images on the outside of one that you might put on the inside, so that it wasn't a hierarchy or a specific kind of narrative order between the outside and the inside.

MS. FRANK: No. That's absolutely true. Yeah. Yeah. And most people were sort of mystified by that, that they wanted more – something on the inside should be this, or something on the outside should be that a little bit –

MS. RICHARDS: And you consciously rejected that.

MS. FRANK: – well, it wasn't so much I rejected it. It isn't what I did. It wasn't the decision to not do that. It was

just different things came as ideas for the inside and outside, and sometimes they seemed to have a connection. Sometimes they seemed very disparate, just in scale, something very big on the inside and something on the outside - very different scale or - but they weren't - certainly, quite a number of them were not explicable, but they made sense to me, in the sense of the senses.

MS. RICHARDS: So there's very little connection between them and religious triptychs, where you have a very distinct order.

MS. FRANK: Yes. The only thing is, the religious ones, of course, are opened for certain holidays, right, only. These you open every day, if you want, and close them.

There was - I don't think I sold very many, but there was a very strong response, and I really appreciated it - from people. It was theatrical.

MS. RICHARDS: And they were mostly large, but a number quite modestly sized, three by four feet opened. What was the distinction you made when you made smaller ones versus big ones?

MS. FRANK: I think what panels I had. [Laughs.] But I wanted to do some smaller ones. And the biggest one, maybe, I think, was five by eight, or four by eight, and I added on to make it five because the panels came four by eight.

And that one - Singer owns that one, actually. I think it is. And that was in - his feet at the top in a boat, or over in a boat, with no means of - no oars. And I think it's, maybe, an owl. I'm trying to think now what's on the outside. I can't remember.

MS. RICHARDS: What's the title of that one?

MS. FRANK: Destinies [1997].

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, okay, it's black with a blue tree on the outside?

MS. FRANK: Yes, Peter Matthiessen wanted that for a cover of his book, but they wouldn't use it. It's gorgeous.

MS. RICHARDS: I was wondering, in the inside, you said a boat; it looked almost like a surfboard. Is it meant to be a kind of -

MS. FRANK: It's meant to be a canoe or - yeah, not a surfboard. [They laugh.]

MS. RICHARDS: - well, I knew it wasn't a surfboard, but I wanted to -

MS. FRANK: Interesting idea that I've drawn people surfing, or I've tried to.

MS. RICHARDS: And then there's another one or two where the central image has a kind of a subtle curve, like the horizon or the edge of the earth, but also like a stage -

MS. FRANK: What else is there?

MS. RICHARDS: There's one called Knowing by Heart. And I thought of this curved plane that looked like a stage.

MS. FRANK: And the two figures on it?

MS. RICHARDS: There's a leaping figure with an owl.

MS. FRANK: Well, the horizon is major for me.

MS. RICHARDS: How is that? Why is it major?

MS. FRANK: Because horizon seems like both the future and the past, maybe depending on how you're feeling, but the horizon's so important. In the east, of course, you don't see it half as much as other places like the west or maybe in Morocco because we have all this fuzz as people say from the West Coast. We have all these trees. People in the west are always very funny about the east.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, if you get high enough, you can see it.

MS. FRANK: Yes, yes, yes. But out west it's ever-present, right? But I think when I was very young, all the figures were in space; they were no place. And then somehow I discovered the horizon, or it had been discovered before, but when you're working, you feel like you come to things - I think from when I was very

young, I used to look at clouds, which was one of the best things to do in the world, and feel the earth turning. That's not unusual, right? But it's a very strong, strong sensation.

There's a wonderful book by a guy named Abrams [sic] – trying to think of his first name now – called something of the senses– I'll think of it. [David Abram. *The Spell of the Sensuous*. London: Vintage Books, 1997.] I met him because I liked the book so much. I don't know what he's written since. And he's talking a lot about people who don't have a written culture and that he feels the language has very, very different meaning to them, which I feel is true and also experience because of not being written –

MS. RICHARDS: Like Native Americans, you mean?

MS. FRANK: – well, for one, yes. But he's traveled a lot. And he got through college by doing magic. He was a fairly good magician, so he used that a lot in traveling, because that allowed him to enter into a lot of things.

[Audio Break.]

MS. RICHARDS: A couple of other questions about process. In a way, you're working intuitively in some sense, but you have to construct panels and canvases in advance in certain sizes and proportions. Obviously – unless you just work on unstretched canvas, you couldn't cut them off.

MS. FRANK: Which I don't know, but I can cut the panels, and I did.

MS. RICHARDS: So you can maintain that flexibility.

MS. FRANK: I kept on – I haven't done that recently, but with *What Color Lament?*, I kept on bringing it down smaller, and it got better, absolutely better. And then I used the pieces I cut off, and put them together and made another painting.

MS. RICHARDS: You were saying before – you will throw things away if they don't work out.

MS. FRANK: Oh, I throw a lot away, but I should throw more away.

MS. RICHARDS: Can you keep reworking the surface, or you prefer not to?

MS. FRANK: Oh, I have some paintings I worked on for 10 years. I don't like it, but every time I thought it was finished, whatever that is, or I was finished with it, then I looked at it later and –

MS. RICHARDS: You've talked about the fact that when you begin a painting, you might just begin with some pure gestural marks.

MS. FRANK: Mm-hm [affirmative]. Color.

MS. RICHARDS: And color –

MS. FRANK: I don't draw, almost ever, only on the canvas or panel.

MS. RICHARDS: – or do drawings in advance of a painting to be a painting.

MS. FRANK: No. I might do a painting – that horse behind you is – in that case, that's based on not a drawing, but another small encaustic painting. But mostly not.

MS. RICHARDS: So as you're beginning a painting and you've –

MS. FRANK: Sometimes I think I'm trying to make a place, which could be air, water, ground, or nothing that I know, but some kind of space, a place, atmosphere, color, and then things can take place, maybe. Now, maybe what takes place I don't like at all, and I change it completely.

MS. RICHARDS: – so you've no idea, when you begin, where you're going to end up.

MS. FRANK: Sometimes I do, and sometimes I don't.

MS. RICHARDS: Whether it's a landscape space or an inscape space.

MS. FRANK: Sometimes I don't know at all. But I have a feeling about some kind of – a space where something would happen or has happened or will happen. I also often think about what happens outside, depending – beyond whatever event is there. I don't know what it is, but – and nobody else, certainly, knows, because it's not there, but –

MS. RICHARDS: You mean a painting that didn't appear.

MS. FRANK: – not a painting that didn't appear; what's beyond the actual painting.

MS. RICHARDS: The next painting? [Laughs.]

MS. FRANK: No, no, in other words, a rectangle is such an artificial space. It can be a very beautiful space, certainly, but it is completely artificial. And maybe it seems that way to me because I am working in clay so much, where a slab of clay is – and you can make a rectangle, but it's not usually a rectangle. And I can't explain it very well, but what – it's like what happened before that I don't know, before whatever is happening in the painting and what might happen after. I mean, this is the limit of the painting, but what if it continued?

When I drew often – when I was drawing, I often – people do that. You have one sheet of paper, and it's not enough, and you just stick another one and sometimes three or four. You keep on – that's one of the beauties of drawing, is tremendous freedom. Or tear it up, and you have – it all gets really little. It's not so easy with panels or canvases, which is sort of too bad. That's like wanting everything to be unlimited, which is sort of crazy.

[Johann Sebastian] Bach had to write those cantatas every week of the year and had, evidently, a very crummy choir, to boost. So that influenced me a lot, this idea of things being unlimited, having this unlimited freedom, unstructured, nonstructure, and what you're going to do, in fact, within the structure. But I do think of that.

And maybe it's a, kind of, almost like – well, maybe it's – I knew Joe Chaikin well. And I went to rehearsals a lot. I did one or two parts of sets –

[Audio break.]

MS. RICHARDS: Okay, Joe Chaikin.

MS. FRANK: I went to lots of rehearsals. He would have these winter projects, summer projects, all these different things where he'd get together with not just actors, sometimes writers, sometimes other directors, sometimes a Japanese monk who was in New York then, or all different people he'd bring in. And they would work on a piece, but often it didn't get produced, and that wasn't really so much the point. Sometimes it did, but the point was to really see how you could develop ideas and, I think, very real theater, not theatrical, but theater, and using voice in all kinds of way.

And there was a wonderful Japanese set designer – I'll think of his name – using all kinds of instruments, many of which were made – handmade – that created all different kinds of sounds. They were music, but not necessarily lovely sounds at all. And they worked with all different texts. They did [Anton] Chekhov, but they did a lot of things based on, sometimes, experiences of the actors, did all kinds of very good work. And to draw at rehearsals was a really great experience, because no matter what models you'd have, they never have – first of all, looking down into a theater or at a loft on the floor –

MS. RICHARDS: What period – what are the dates, approximately, that you're drawing this?

MS. FRANK: Probably from before '70 and, really, for years. I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: Like 10 years, 20?

MS. FRANK: Not 20 but over – probably over 10. And I have books – tons, really, of sketch books. And then sort of I write down things, too. And it was a very strong experience. And then to try to draw people moving around and everything, but also was this interesting view, often looking down, not at a loft, but in the theater, looking down obliquely at people doing everything – killing each other, dancing, singing, whatever [it] was they're doing, not the kind of thing you'd if you'd be drawing.

MS. RICHARDS: I read a quote where you said, "In my mind, there's a constant equivalent between color and music. I do make a lot of correlations, not always consciously, with music and theater." Can you talk about that?

MS. FRANK: Well, the theater is a little different than the correlation between music and art, music and color. Probably I would like very much to be able to create states of feelings that I feel that music gives me. Very different – music is really more universal than art. People make art everywhere, but I don't think it has the quality of universality that music does. And the strongest of all might be singing, because it comes directly out of the body, without anything at all. But the emotional range of the music of all different kinds is just so enormous. And I sometimes feel my work, the emotional range is too – contained.

MS. RICHARDS: What about the sense of color in your work, your color palette? You talked about painting,

starting to paint, which gave you the opportunity to use more color. And as you've been working, there're lots of black and white, but then vibrant color. Some paintings are all vibrant color. Some are mostly black and white. But do you have a sense that your color palette comes from certain references, or that has been evolving over the years, or neither?

MS. FRANK: I hope it's evolving. It's hard for me to judge that.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you use color for mostly formal purposes, or mostly evocative and narrative purposes?

MS. FRANK: Not formal.

MS. RICHARDS: Not formal.

MS. FRANK: Not really narrative. There are narrative aspects in the work, but I don't think – I don't think so.

MS. RICHARDS: It's not naturalistic color.

MS. FRANK: No, no.

MS. RICHARDS: Where does the color come from?

MS. FRANK: It's not very helpful to say, but I think color is the biggest mystery of all in the painting. I don't know what to say more. There is more, certainly, to say, but –

MS. RICHARDS: Two more basic questions – you talk about titling your works and not. We talked about Daphne and Persephone and the fact that those might have come to you after you made the work. Do you generally title the works after you've made them?

MS. FRANK: Mostly, mostly.

MS. RICHARDS: And what is your approach to finding the right title? You certainly don't use "untitled." You don't use numbering.

MS. FRANK: That is just awful when you do that. It creates a lot of problems. Nobody knows what on earth you're talking about. If you're going to talk about a walking woman and another 400 of them. I used to sometimes use "untitled" because I didn't know what to title, but now I don't want to use the "untitled" because it's just confusing.

I don't think it's a big issue. Sometimes it's sort of difficult.

MS. RICHARDS: You'd ask other people for advice about titles?

MS. FRANK: I have occasionally, yeah. And I've taken it, too, but mostly I come up with something.

MS. RICHARDS: Does it present more of a problem in different mediums? Is it easier in drawing –

MS. FRANK: No, I don't think so, really. It's just that I don't want the title to be descriptive, because I'd like people to – anyone looking to be able to have their own mind, not filled with what I've said –

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, it's usually the problem.

MS. FRANK: Yes, yes, so that's –

MS. RICHARDS: Are you usually, or hardly ever, working on more than one piece at a time?

MS. FRANK: Almost always.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that because of the oil medium, just practical reasons, or you like to work on multiple pieces at once?

MS. FRANK: It's complicated. I don't know if it's always "like," but I do. I'm not sure that it's like. It's either restlessness or coming back to things I felt were finished, or I work on, I think, on too many pieces because they're so wonderful.

MS. RICHARDS: In the sense of, I can't think of what to do next. I'll start a new painting. I'll start a new drawing. Is that what you mean by restlessness, not being able to resolve one thing and moving on to something else?

MS. FRANK: Well, there is some of that. I think I want paintings. I don't only want to look at the paintings. I want the paintings to look out also. Maybe that's what icons did, right? I think they did. I think that was sort of the intention, not that I'm making icons, but -

[Audio break.]

I have lot of despair about my painting lately. And also I do want to talk about the photos.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. FRANK: I don't want to talk about them now.

MS. RICHARDS: So why don't we just talk about the solar cookers now and -

MS. FRANK: Good, and we'll do whatever else starting fresh. I'm glad you can do this.

[Audio break.]

MS. RICHARDS: So we're changing subjects a bit right now. Talk about your involvement with this organization that is called -

MS. FRANK: Solar Cookers International.

MS. RICHARDS: How did that involvement begin, and why is it so meaningful to you?

MS. FRANK: Well, I was traveling with Leo, and we were in New Mexico. And I knew Jean-Louis Bourgeois, Louise's [Bourgeois] son, who she seems not to be hardly involved with, a terrific man. It turned out - I remember he had written a review of a work of mine, way at the beginning, at the Tanager Gallery, or something, one of the 10th Street galleries. And I went to visit him and his wife, then. She's died since -

MS. RICHARDS: What was her name?

MS. FRANK: - Carollee Pelos.

MS. RICHARDS: Carollee?

MS. FRANK: Carollee Pelos. And he's done these wonderful books on adobe architecture all over the world. They did them together. She photographed, and he wrote. They have two books, one called Spectacular Vernacular [The Adobe Tradition. New York: Aperture Foundation Inc., 1990]. Because adobe is all over the world. People don't realize - including in places like England and Japan.

Anyhow, they had land with no water, no electricity - that's how they got it - facing the Rio Grande Valley with views of 50 miles or something, but they had then no money. So that's how they got that land, and built a very amazing adobe house, not so much fancy as - it was sculpture, the adobe outside. And was using his computer on solar [energy].

And I don't know how much they were using it, but they talked about the solar cookers. She did, particularly. I said, "What are you talking about?" We had - Leo and I had this Woodstock / El Salvador sister city during the war in El Salvador, which our government was supporting in killing people.

And because of that, what I began to understand about it would be that it would be very useful there. It was a tiny pueblo [town] of 100; people would come back from Honduras during the war. They had not been a pueblo - pueblo before. They came from different places, but they'd met and come together in the refugee camp, gotten this piece of land, and have, of course, no money, and seeing the people beheaded, always in front of everyone else, and raped. And they're trying to survive. And it was a set-up of [inaudible, in Spanish] -

MS. RICHARDS: This was in New Mexico near Jean-Louis?

MS. FRANK: No, El Salvador.

MS. RICHARDS: You're using the term "pueblo" in El Salvador.

MS. FRANK: Called El Buen Pastor in El Salvador -

MS. RICHARDS: I'm sorry, called what?

MS. FRANK: - El Buen Pastor, "the good shepherd." And they were supported by the Church of the Good Shepherd, in Iowa I think. And then we became also an official sister city.

MS. RICHARDS: Woodstock.

MS. FRANK: Woodstock. And we had a group, and we raised money, and we brought some of the people from the village, from the pueblo, to Woodstock. And we sent people down during the war and after.

Leo and I went for the first election after the war, which was a pretty astounding experience. Also, I thought the people would be incredibly sad and depressed. I'm not saying that they weren't at all, but their whole way of being and sense of community was like something I had never, ever seen, ever. In fact, I haven't seen it since. And it was very, very inspiring because they, although they had almost nothing, were doing better than some other villages, which had even less. And so they were actually even helping other villages.

And we got the money so they could build a small school, and hired teachers from San Salvador, from the capital, and we went to – it really started partly because of that film Romero [1989], which – have you seen it? It's with that great actor who's died, a Puerto Rican actor [Raul Julia].

MS. RICHARDS: Mel Ferrer?

MS. FRANK: No, younger than that, a very good actor. Anyhow, I'll think of it.

And that film really showed, you know, the killing of the archbishop [Archbishop Oscar Romero]. And when he was put in, actually, by the church as archbishop, he was put in because they figured this man is very weak. He won't make any problems. But as he saw more people killed and tortured, he became very, in fact, strong and very active. And he knew he was going to be killed. And it's a very good film. And we got it shown in Woodstock. And so we had this sister city for 10 years.

Anyhow, when we went to Jean-Louis Bourgeois and heard about the solar cookers, that was my first idea, because I had never used one or anything, so I didn't really know. And I got in touch with the people, who were based in Sacramento [CA], where I'm to go now, after doing the work with the printers in San Diego [CA], because I'm going to meet with them in a synagogue, and going to speak in a synagogue which is giving money to Solar Cookers International.

MS. RICHARDS: In Sacramento.

MS. FRANK: In San Diego. They've been very active raising money for solar cookers. And what it is is that you can cook with the sun, and cook everything, meat, fish, bread, cake, vegetables, rice, beans, and purify water against 98 percent of the diseases. The sun is free. The cookers cost so little, and you can make them – I could sit on the street and make 30 a day, at least, if I wanted to, using old cardboard boxes, using the pattern. And I'd have to buy aluminum paper and glue it on. If I didn't have glue, I could use flour and water. And then you need a black pot, and you need a plastic bag. And the cooker folds up and can be put in a backpack, weighs less than a pound. It's astounding.

MS. RICHARDS: Of course, you need sun.

MS. FRANK: You need sun. Most of the countries where the deforestation is extreme have more sun than they can possibly use. Here, our latitude, New York, the same as most of Afghanistan, I can start cooking in April and cook a chicken, have a window facing south. Open the window, put the cooker in there, chicken or rice or whatever, till about October 20th. The closer you are to the equator – we're not so close – the longer you can cook, both sides of the equator, obviously. And millions of people can cook, free energy, no pollution, no carbon, save what's left of the forests, save women from lung cancer, emphysema, eye diseases, children with terrible burns, most common accident, because they want to be around their mothers. The baby at the breast while the mother is stirring. Why do you stir? Because otherwise it would burn. Here nothing burns. You don't stir.

In a demonstration at the U.N. with a woman from Kenya – two women – I was helping. We cooked all the foods I just mentioned. People from 45 countries, with tears streaming down their faces, men and women from all over, and not only the countries you'd expect, but Ukraine, Macedonia, Columbia, all over the place, lots of places [where] there's no wood anymore. People think of Brazil, absolutely true, but the deforestation is everywhere, and every family, half the world, cooks with wood; every family uses over a ton a year.

So I talk to people, and I demonstrate. I cook for people. I just today had a very good taxi driver, a Bangladeshi, who came as a Muslim, is going back to Bangladesh as a born-again Christian, doing God's work. I told him about this. He was astounded, as most people are. And he understood completely. I didn't have to explain anything; he had lived here for years, but he understands. And he says he will see.

MS. RICHARDS: How many have been distributed or created? Do you have any idea?

MS. FRANK: Nobody knows, but – millions, but not enough. It's in 94 countries, but that's very deceptive

because it could be in three villages in one place. It could be – in Kenya is a big office where Margaret Owino is working, a really great woman.

MS. RICHARDS: What's her name?

MS. FRANK: Margaret Owino. O-W-I-N-O. A woman, who when I saw her last and we hugged as she was leaving – big woman, tall and big, big embrace, soft. And she said, "Mary, you hear my heart; you feel my heart?" I said, yes. She said, "I feel yours. Don't forget it." You don't get messages like that very often, right?

MS. RICHARDS: What's the biggest impediment to the further proliferation?

MS. FRANK: Just to make money. It's not money-making, I think. And they don't get enough grants because people don't believe it, although it was a piece in National Geographic, one page, but there was just that big piece in the New Yorker talking about these new wood stoves, which are good because they use much less wood, and they don't make so much carbon, but they're still using wood, and they're still making carbon.

People called me as if I'd written the damn article and said, I kept on looking, looking. I expected solar cookers. Not one mention. I don't know. But it's moving, but they need money desperately. Recession has hit them all. These were people who were giving regularly, every year, sizable amounts. But I think it is unbelievable unless you see it and use it. People are smart. Yes, it makes sense. Black pot, the sun, angles, of course, why wouldn't it cook?

But I don't think even a lot of very intelligent people really believe it till they see it and eat it. Burn their finger on the pot. I burned my finger the first time. They said, use a pot holder. But because I wasn't used to the heat coming from the air, from underneath, I just grabbed the pot. I wanted to see what was going on.

Food is delicious, and it's the healthiest food. You cook all vegetables without water. You cook an artichoke, which I think it was sort of a dry vegetable – you end up with that much artichoke juice. It's cooking very slowly. Shrimp, chicken – I make Persian chicken with nuts and pomegranates.

MS. RICHARDS: Does your connection with this have anything to do with a video [A Matter of Spirit, 1998] that was made about you by Paul Tschinkel –

MS. FRANK: No –

MS. RICHARDS: No, I'm just curious.

MS. FRANK: – no, I don't think – that's before I knew about this.

MS. RICHARDS: The video was before '97.

MS. FRANK: Yes, yes. Otherwise it would be in it. [Laughter.] But I think it does have to do with one – there's one connection with my son, actually, because he was schizophrenic, also very smart and very connected to it. He had a lot of knowledge of the natural world in many ways. And way before people were talking solar or anything, or before I heard them talking solar or anything, not even cooking, just solar, he was always talking about solar – the sun. And he had wonderful knowledge, and that was probably our strongest connection, of the natural world – you can learn lots of things, and with him it was great – anywhere with him, he saw everything – pleasure to walk in the woods.

MS. RICHARDS: Great. That's probably enough, yeah?

[END CD 6.]

This is Judith Richards interviewing Mary Frank on West 19th Street [New York City], on February 3, 2010, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc seven.

Mary, when we last spoke, you were talking about your involvement with the solar cookers and all about it.

MS. FRANK: Do I need a thing on?

MS. RICHARDS: No, no, it will pick up right here. And as far as your work, we were talking about works you did in the '90s, the triptychs, et cetera.

And when I come to about '96, '97, there was a video that was done of you called A Matter of Spirit, by Paul Tschinkel. I wanted to ask you about the circumstances of that, how it happened. Was it something that you were eager to do? What was the purpose of it? I haven't had the opportunity to see it.

MS. FRANK: I think he did a series [ART/New York]. He did Louise Bourgeois. He did a lot of people.

MS. RICHARDS: Were they mainly women that he did?

MS. FRANK: No.

MS. RICHARDS: No.

MS. FRANK: She came to mind.

MS. RICHARDS: And do you remember how many minutes yours was?

MS. FRANK: Maybe they are about a half an hour, maybe a bit more.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, substantial.

MS. FRANK: And I think - I would have to really look at it again. You know, I haven't seen it for a while. I think there were good things in it. It is just that that form of having - who did he have speak? You know, they have experts speak about your work. And that form, I mean, depending on the expert, maybe they used - if they did use Linda Nochlin. See, that is what I can't really remember. She is very good. And I think maybe Ed DeLuca spoke a little bit through the gallery.

But I think it is hard to find someone to make a good - you know, some kind of biographical film that has - that really can capture some quality. I mean, they have to - they need a lot of time to do it because they have to throw away so much. I mean, you know, the percentage of what can be used. And then depending on the kind of question, that is what - if someone is interviewing you, it is so important. So I need to look at it again actually.

And then there was one done years ago by somebody from Boston TV [WGBH]. And I don't know where that one is, in fact.

MS. RICHARDS: Have there been films of other artists that you remember that were excellent, that were a model?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, I think so. What is her name? The woman who did all the portraits, Alice Neel, who I knew. That is a very good - it is very, very sad, powerful.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, it is a recent movie [Alice Neel. Directed by grandson Andrew Neel, 2007].

MS. FRANK: And it is so powerful because there are her sons talking about her. And one of them is in her life totally. He seems to hardly have his own, you know. So it is very painful.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. FRANK: But you also do get to understand what she went through, which you wouldn't necessarily.

MS. RICHARDS: That's right.

MS. FRANK: You certainly wouldn't through just knowing her. That is a strong thing.

MS. RICHARDS: So the approach that that film took of putting so much personal information, as opposed to some other films that dwell mainly on the work and art historians talking about the work - that turned out, for Alice Neel, to be very powerful.

MS. FRANK: I think it was essential, really. Her life was so particular. I mean, every aspect of who she was with, the man, the countries, the different - I mean, it was so - it was a very extreme life, really. And there she looked like this lovely old grandma. She could be quite vicious, verbally, with a smile.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you ever meet her?

MS. FRANK: Oh, I knew her. Yeah, oh, yeah. She would say things with a smile that were just devastating.

MS. RICHARDS: Like what?

MS. FRANK: Oh, she would say terrible things about people. But, you know, I mean, quite cruel.

MS. RICHARDS: What?

MS. FRANK: Personal things.

MS. RICHARDS: Like, "She is a horrible painter"?

MS. FRANK: Or about their personal life. But it was done with sort of like French 18th-century style.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you exchange studio visits with her?

MS. FRANK: No, not really. I don't know if she would have been interested. No.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you talk about painting with her?

MS. FRANK: I don't remember that. No. It was more – she was in Robert's film, the one he made, Pull My Daisy. And I was also in it, very, you know, as a background person, with my daughter also. But I used to just see her around. I respected her a lot as an artist.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember talking to her about your mutual struggles as a woman in the art world?

MS. FRANK: No, no.

MS. RICHARDS: It wouldn't have come up.

MS. FRANK: Well, might with someone else - with her, I don't know. No.

MS. RICHARDS: Also around the time this film was made, you did – you had been working with pastels continually, I think. But you did pastels about nature, about mythology using the owl. I think the owl figure has come up – had come up before.

MS. FRANK: Not only in pastels, other things.

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MS. FRANK: And oil.

MS. RICHARDS: I wanted to ask you, how did you approach the use of pastels? And why would you create a work in pastels rather than in paint?

MS. FRANK: I don't think I ever exactly think like that, you know. I just move from one to another, and then often cover it all up. I can cover pastel up with – I don't know – sometimes acrylic or something, you know.

That might not be my initial idea. I mean, I do love pastel, but I don't – there are not many I do that I really like. I think it has a very wonderful quality of just being, sort of, pure pigment and that dryness. But I find it very also evasive for me. I mean, there is more pastel in my mind than – but the owls are mainly, probably, acrylic and oil.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah. Do you recall when that owl image first – where it first came from?

MS. FRANK: No, I mean, I have always drawn birds and animals. And there is one – there is an owl that doesn't look very owl-like, actually, in the book I did with Peter Matthiessen, flying right at you. But that wasn't done from observation at all. It was very hard to do an owl from – I have done some, because then there is – I know this man who does rehabilitation on hurt raptors. So then I did get to see them really close, you know, on a gauntlet on his hand.

And then, of course, you never would touch any of the, you know, raptor birds. But then one day, he had a barn owl that had fallen out, a baby chick, a fledgling, I guess. And because that owl knew him as mother, father, he could touch it without – you know, without the glove. I mean, they have these ferocious talons and beak, right? They could take your finger off easily.

So then he said, well, you can touch it. It is standing there with its long legs. Their legs are very powerful and quite long. The body is really very small. The wings are very big. But it was standing with the wings down and with that astounding heart-shaped face and with its ears, which are asymmetrical, although you don't see that. That is the only bird that has – it is so they can triangulate sound. They can find mice, you know, under three feet of snow, because they can hear them – nobody else can – when they are way up.

So I said, what do you mean, I can touch it? He always told me I can never touch it, of course. He said, well, this one you can because, you know, I had it since it was tiny. So he said, yeah, you can touch it, you know, right here on the breast. So I very, very carefully bent over, and then I thought I was touching it. I said to him, I

don't feel anything. He said, that is right. I said, I am touching it, but I don't feel anything.

And then he explained to me all feathers on owls - at the end of each whatever you call that - they're not barbs - whatever, you know, the feather is made of - at the end of each one, there is a tiny, you know, microscopic bit that sort of hangs down, which is what cuts sound completely. So a big, six-foot [sic] owl can fly right by you, and if you don't - if you have your eyes closed, you'd know if there was a sparrow flying 20 feet away. You can hear it, right? There is no sound [with the owl], and that is because of the feathers, which are just totally unique.

And because of that and the down, I guess, I just - I didn't feel anything. It was really like a - it was astounding. But he corroborated, because I thought, well, maybe, I don't feel it. So anyhow, I have read a lot about them. And they are - you know, they are all over the world. And some are endangered. Fortunately, a lot aren't because, you know, they eat rats.

We had a snow owl from, you know, the Arctic, right across the street. Leo saw it sitting on top of the [inaudible]. And I called Marie Winn, the bird lady from Central Park.

MS. RICHARDS: Marie Winn?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, she runs this whole big bird thing in Central Park - because I thought she would want to know. And she has seen everything, you know, all of the hawks and the owls up there and everything. But she had never seen the snow owl in New York. And she said she had to finish a piece she writes for the Wall Street Journal on nature. She has written those books, Red-Tails in Love [New York: Pantheon, 1998].

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, yeah.

MS. FRANK: And she said, oh, I can't come. She said, are you sure? I said, I am absolutely sure, because nothing else looks like this. It looks like a bird with a big white fur feather hat. The head is so big, you know. You can't see the eyes or anything. And then she called back. She said, I am coming. What is your subway stop? And she came down. It stayed -

MS. RICHARDS: So she saw it?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, it stayed at least overnight one night. And I think it came down - well, I can't say exactly. But they tore up the whole third of the block to make a horrible big apartment house. But while they were tearing, they were going down into deep bedrock, Manhattan schist, right? And, of course, they disturbed all the rats.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, so it was a wonderful hunting ground.

MS. FRANK: Yeah. And they took off, always at dusk.

MS. RICHARDS: Did Marie say where it would go at night? Did she know?

MS. FRANK: No, she didn't know. But I think it stayed there on that building, actually, although I couldn't see it at night.

MS. RICHARDS: Speaking of engaging with nature, you have used photographs that you have taken - not today, but in the '90s - and you have talked about them as a kind of aide-memoire. I mean -

MS. FRANK: What photographs?

MS. RICHARDS: You have taken photographs, black-and-white and color photographs of landscapes to refer to when you were painting.

MS. FRANK: Is that true?

MS. RICHARDS: Well, - and you called yourself a sub-amateur photographer. [Laughs.] Very modest.

MS. FRANK: It must be true. It must be true.

MS. RICHARDS: You talked about using the photographs that you took - snapshots, whatever - to remember what things looked like as you are indoors -

MS. FRANK: It is probably true, and I forgot that I had - yeah, yeah. I forgot that I -

MS. RICHARDS: And I was just wondering if you still do that - if that was -

MS. FRANK: No, I don't think so. I think it is very unusual. Now, of course, my photographing is totally different, and it is not so –

MS. RICHARDS: It was unusual then because it really didn't matter what something actually looked like. You were inventing the forms.

MS. FRANK: Well, I must have wanted to remember something. I don't think it didn't matter at all. I mean, I didn't care – I didn't care that it was a good photograph. It was just some aspect of light maybe or, you know, a form. I forgot even that I did that. But I think you are right. If I told you that, it is probably true.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs] I read it.

MS. FRANK: Oh, you read it?

MS. RICHARDS: And you also – you were talking about shifting smoothly between mediums using paint.

MS. FRANK: It is not always so smooth.

MS. RICHARDS: And it is as if you are collaging elements.

MS. FRANK: Sometimes I am.

MS. RICHARDS: Not actual photographs, but images.

MS. FRANK: Are you talking about now with the photographs?

MS. RICHARDS: I am talking about then, about 10 years -

MS. FRANK: You are talking about paintings?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, the late '90s.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, that was a lot of collage.

MS. RICHARDS: And stencils. I know we talked previously about your use of intuition and about the kind of spontaneity in not planning in advance. And I just wanted to, kind of, go back and check. Is that still the case, where you had all these elements, I guess, at hand in the studio and you would approach a painting and just start, as you said?

MS. FRANK: Well, it is deceptive because it is not just one or just the other at all. I have a lot of ideas, most of which don't work. So then they get – you know, they disappear or they are thrown out. But like *Of Mice and Men* plans, right? So then something else happens. And maybe those ideas get – the initial ideas get used again and again, you know, years later.

MS. RICHARDS: But they are also hints of the past actions remaining on the canvas, which seem to be an important piece.

MS. FRANK: Well, yeah, because unless I totally cover the painting, which I don't usually do, but I often cover a lot of it. There is just maybe one part left. It depends how long I work on things. This painting – those two really go together. But I don't know. It is over 10 years old.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you have a title on that painting?

MS. FRANK: No, it has that image that I called "Voice," which is the face with the line coming through the mouth, although you can't see it much here.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, I can.

MS. FRANK: And the figure standing on that kind of horizon. Anyhow, every time I think it is finished, every once in a while, I change it. I don't know if I will – I hope I will finish.

MS. RICHARDS: It looks like a vortex swirling.

MS. FRANK: Yeah. There are many vortexes.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you feel about the way people read your work? Is there a level that you expect, that you require?

MS. FRANK: No, absolutely not. And I don't even understand people who do. I don't. I mean, when you work, and then if it is out there, if it is not sitting in your stacks or someone's basement, you know, then it is there. I mean, I don't understand how you could demand that people see it abstractly or realistically or whatever it is that someone might have as an intention - not me, but people say, you know- someone is looking at their work, and they say, oh, no, that is not it at all. I just can't understand that.

I mean, maybe it isn't for them, but the work is out. I like, obviously, different people's interpretations. Sometimes they are quite startling. I have had numerous people cry at shows. And I have had people write me poems and all kinds of things, including things I don't understand at all. But mostly, I feel rather fortunate that - I feel like I have had a lot of response. And I am not talking about critical, you know, just people. And that I feel fortunate that quite a lot of it has been very strong. To me, that is to the point much more than, you know, so much of whether they like it or think it is wonderful or think it is original, you know. It is much more that it affects them.

And I think if somebody cries, for whatever reason they do - or not reason, for whatever, you know, that is fine - or laughs or whatever it is. Much more interesting than an analytical response.

MS. RICHARDS: When you finish a work, how long does it take before you understand it - I don't know if that is the right word - but you can read it yourself and imagine its meaning, its most important meaning? And does that change if you look at a painting five or 10 or 20 years later?

MS. FRANK: Absolutely. There is work that I really loved which I [later] think is just horrible. And I have thrown out a lot of work. And I am going to throw out a lot more.

MS. RICHARDS: Something you loved when you made it?

MS. FRANK: Mm-hm [affirmative], and maybe for a while after, too.

MS. RICHARDS: Why would you throw it out if it were a true representation of how you felt at a certain point?

MS. FRANK: Well, that is not enough. [Laughs.] If it doesn't continue to speak to me, you know. Sometimes I repaint things. I just cover them, because I don't like to throw away the materials.

MS. RICHARDS: So you are critiquing earlier work, in that sense, continually.

MS. FRANK: Oh, yeah. Don't you think people do?

MS. RICHARDS: Not necessarily. You could take the approach, "I know that that is how I felt then. That is what I thought was important then. I don't think that now. But I am onto new things. I am not going to worry about the past."

MS. FRANK: Well, there is also life. I mean, this is a big space, but it gets filled up. I have got 60 drawers, and they are mostly full, work on paper. That is just here.

MS. RICHARDS: The practical considerations of keeping things.

MS. FRANK: Yeah. I mean, there is that, too.

MS. RICHARDS: When you look back at something, and let's say you continue to have a positive reaction, do you -

MS. FRANK: No, there're things I can't do anymore, and I know I can't do them. I would like to think I could, but I know I can't.

MS. RICHARDS: You can't emotionally, or physically?

MS. FRANK: No, no, I couldn't do them now. It is not only physical. I just couldn't do that for whatever -

MS. RICHARDS: But those are works that you keep?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, the ones that are interesting, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: So their meaning changes as time goes by to you?

MS. FRANK: I think everything changes.

MS. RICHARDS: As well as to the viewer, I am sure.

MS. FRANK: Everything. Our selves are changing, the weather, the climate –

MS. RICHARDS: And have you also, in parallel to that, found that people read the same work that you did in 1980, when it is shown in 2005, they will read it differently than they would have in 2000?

MS. FRANK: I think so. It is sort of inevitable. Bridget, DC Moore, is going to show three or four of the wood pieces from the '50s and '60s at the – what is it called – the art fair at the Armory. I mentioned that. And, well, first of all, most people will have never seen them, because when I showed wood pieces was in the '60s, I guess. I showed with Radich.

MS. RICHARDS: Late '50s, '60s, yeah.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, Radich. I showed some at Poindexter. That was sort of a first show. So first of all, lots of people are not alive, and lots of people never saw them. And I can't – I have no idea how they would look to people. They look strange to me, but there are some I like.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it your idea to show them, or Bridget's?

MS. FRANK: No, it was her idea.

MS. RICHARDS: I am glad you are doing it.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, I am, too. I wish she would show the photographs, too. It would be an interesting juxtaposition.

MS. RICHARDS: Which photographs?

MS. FRANK: The ones I am working on now.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. Around 2000, 2002, I am not sure, you had the occasion to see [Diego] Velazquez, I think, in the Prado [Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain]. And that inspired you to do some works related to him. Talk about that experience with Velazquez.

MS. FRANK: Well, I forget when I was in Spain. I saw them there. Of course, I had seen some before. But there are lots of [inaudible] at Prado, and to see them there – and I was very, very struck by the dwarfs, in particular, not only – I mean, I didn't know for a long time that the dwarfs were kept by the court probably for more than one reason. Sort of playthings – I mean, the infanta certainly didn't have anyone to play with. And she was probably wearing [a] 140-pound dress, right? So I don't know how she could play anyhow.

I mean, what they wore was quite insane. There was so much metal thread – gold, silver. I don't know what else.

MS. RICHARDS: In layers.

MS. FRANK: It wasn't like clothing. It was like armor. And up to here and no feet. I don't think you ever see the feet of women in Spanish royalty. Men, yeah, big shoes with buckles. The dress comes right down.

MS. RICHARDS: In the 17th, 18th century?

MS. FRANK: Except the Majas [by Goya: La Maja Desnuda, 1797-1800; La Maja Vestida, 1798-1805], that is different. Then you see these pointy shoes.

Anyhow, this is conjecture, a lot, on my part, but I did then read that they had them to point out the perfection of the royalty, to have these people who were deformed. I mean, they had royalty that had – what do you call –

MS. RICHARDS: I can't remember.

MS. FRANK: All kinds of awful things.

MS. RICHARDS: Inbred diseases.

MS. FRANK: Inbred. And they tried to make gardens three times as big as [Le Chateau de] Versailles [France] and, you know, indebted the entire country. The only thing is that that Philip [IV], right, had amazing ideas about art. And he got Velazquez to go to Rome and bring back all these, you know, great Italian paintings. That was the one thing.

But the dwarfs are very, very interesting because, I mean, they are such powerful and sort of – they are full of anger and humiliation. I mean, all kinds of things that he could have never done with the royal family, right?

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MS. FRANK: So he had a kind of freedom. And there is all this red and green and black [inaudible]. They are formidable paintings. And then he takes a dwarf who has very short legs, and he seats him like this, totally for shortening. You see the sole of the shoes. And some of them had different positions. There is one who obviously wrote. You see him in a crazy pot. I forget his name. But he is sitting writing with a plume and a bottle of ink. So he must have been, you know, educated.

But I think sometimes they gave one away if somebody came from Austria and they liked one. It was like, you like this chair; take it with you when you go. I think Maribarbola, the big dwarf in Las Meninas [1656] - she is actually sort of the biggest figure in the painting. And I did a number of drawings just of her face.

MS. RICHARDS: I don't remember her name.

MS. FRANK: Maribarbola.

MS. RICHARDS: That is it.

MS. FRANK: She may have been originally from somewhere else. But I think she was then given away. I mean, I think you can look at the paintings. You don't have to know any of that. But I did find it very amazing because, of course, Velazquez doesn't talk about any of this. But it is in the painting.

MS. RICHARDS: And from that, you did a number of work on paper.

MS. FRANK: Well, I did a big panel of four by eight, which included a number of drawings after Velazquez, including that incredible painting, Aesop, which I just did the head. And that one was amazing. He wasn't a dwarf. He was somebody off the street. And he is referred to as being bovine. I mean, in other words, he was not considered good looking. To me, he is astounding looking. But, of course, it wasn't the features they were looking for, you know, the fine nose. And he is wearing this sort of - it looks like a rug around him. You know, it is a big portrait. Amazing.

I have done quite a number of drawings from that, but maybe only one that I liked. I might go back to it some time. I have always done some portraits, you know. And I haven't even thought of it as portraiture. I have just drawn people, live drawings. I have done thousands of heads. But I never liked mostly of heads [sic]. I never thought - I never felt I could really do portraits somehow.

MS. RICHARDS: What do you think were lacking? What qualities?

MS. FRANK: Something important. And then when I began to do a lot, and I had people come sit for me - beside portraits when I did from Rembrandt [van Rijn] and a number from Velazquez - but then I did, you know, a good friend and actor, Albert Epstein, with the animal head superimposed. And some of the others have animals, too. I just began doing really a lot, mostly on paper. And I just, you know - I mean, it is an astounding thing to really gaze at a human face.

And I remember an experience I had being on a train, in France, I think. And I was seated across, sort of diagonally, from a man who would probably sort of unanimously be considered really not attractive, not good looking in any way, not deformed, but just unfortunate. You know, and also his expression. And I started drawing him, and he was very preoccupied, so he didn't notice and didn't mind. And I drew him for quite a while. I forget where I was going.

And I realized the more I drew him, there was no more question at all of whether he was attractive, good looking, bad looking, any of those things, you know. It was this human face. And when he got up to get off the train, I was really upset because I wasn't finished. [Laughs.] And I wanted to say, just stay for one more station, which, of course, I couldn't do. But it was the most - I have had other experiences like that, where the sense of somebody changes through observation - I mean, observation and work both. But how much do people really look at each other?

I always thought the Picassos - I am sure I am not the only person who thinks this - with the eyes swimming around the face, that one of the sources of that would be when you are in love. I mean, it could be man-woman, man-man, woman-woman; it could be with a child, too, that that kind of close gaze - the faces going places, right? I mean, when you are really close, the eyes don't stay here. Mouths could end up - or three eyes. Don't you think that?

And it seems like a particular, maybe not privilege, but a wonderful thing to really look at a human face. But I feel the same way also looking at animals.

MS. RICHARDS: Now, if I recall, mostly in your paintings, the faces and the animals, they are not of specific

individuals. They are not transfers from that experience.

MS. FRANK: No.

MS. RICHARDS: They are mostly –

MS. FRANK: More generalized.

MS. RICHARDS: Generalized.

MS. FRANK: More generalized.

MS. RICHARDS: More symbolic and more standing in for a particular kind of feeling or situation.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, that's true.

MS. RICHARDS: Why is that? Why wouldn't you use that experience of the portrait?

MS. FRANK: Well, first of all, that has only been fairly recent. Those portraits are fairly recent. That was the last show, all those portraits.

MS. RICHARDS: That is right.

MS. FRANK: Sixty portraits.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah. Do you think you will continue?

MS. FRANK: Well, I may or may not. But those are mostly from life. Some of them are from my head. Some of them are from real people. Some are from people who have died. Some of them are from other artists, Velazquez or Rembrandt. And then there is one that has no features at all. I don't know if you remember that one. It is a monoprint. It is black and white, and it is basically an unfeatured head, sort of egg-shaped.

I think about that. But in paintings where I am using a body, a body that has a face – I guess so far I haven't wanted it to be so specific, because maybe it would take away from the rest of what is going on. But it is not some idea that I have that I am, you know, attached to. It just seems to be more how I work. And maybe, at some point, there would be faces on figures that would be more particular.

But often for me, character, whatever that is, is maybe more an aspect of certain kinds of composition that create time tensions or ambiguities that maybe somebody else would be focusing, maybe, more on the expression of face – of a face. Is that clear? Not quite. In other words, it is all different –

MS. RICHARDS: Although over time – yes, well, the content would certainly change if you had a specific person and a specific expression of that person.

MS. FRANK: Yes, yes. In the way that I am working right now. You know, it could change.

MS. RICHARDS: Although over time, when people can identify who it is, just as specific portraits in art history have much more universal meaning to us than it did maybe to the painter at the moment.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, it is an interesting subject, really. I think it is very interesting. And I don't think I have even given it, you know, that much – I mean, I think about it. But I don't think it has become a preoccupation, in a way, that particularly has gone anywhere.

MS. RICHARDS: In the past, mostly your references were to non-Western art, to ancient art, to images that you could say have sort of a universal archetypal kind of quality –

MS. FRANK: Yeah, it wasn't intentional, but it's true. Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: – which is sort of the opposite of focusing on an individual, living or not-living person –

MS. FRANK: Yes, it's true. It's true. I was always really, you know, compelled by those images.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you feel yourself – these interests evolving now toward the specific – toward – I know this is a recent series of portraits, a few years ago.

MS. FRANK: More generalized?

MS. RICHARDS: Do you refer less to these earlier works from other cultures and find yourself more focused on

today, on what you are seeing yourself, your own observations?

MS. FRANK: I don't think I really make a distinction. That's the truth. I just looked at some drawings. They are not here. They are over there somewhere.

There is an African sculpture that is in the African collection at the Met of a bent-over figure. I don't know if you know it – clay. It is about that big. It is astounding. It is really of a power. It looks like it is 40 feet high. And they don't really seem to know – it is this sort of crouched-over figure: head is on a knee, arm is underneath, and then big, sort of, bumps on it, which maybe refer to scarification, but maybe not.

And it is not – it is quite rough. There is a lot of African clay sculpture that is very fine. This one isn't. And emotionally, it is just like, Pow! You know? And I don't know how old it is. It is old. It is not new. But that figure could be in Port de [inaudible]. It could be on Orchard Street. It could be anywhere.

MS. RICHARDS: When you go to the Metropolitan, do you mostly go to those galleries?

MS. FRANK: No, it depends what is there. I go to the Oriental galleries a lot. I go to Egypt. It just depends how much time I have. When I was young, I never got to see most of the museum. Egypt, I was pulled in, like by some powerful rope on a ratchet. You know, I couldn't get out.

But only recently, I found – well, maybe eight years ago or something, I saw the image of a soul. You know, they are always talking about soul, right? The Book of the Dead, the soul of the waiting – but I never saw soul.

And then one day, I was looking – it was some – it was a special show of Egyptian art, maybe some Roman. It could have been late. But there is some big painting with all kinds of stuff going around and not maybe, you know, a very wonderful painting. But it said something about the soul.

And somehow I am just wandering around. And then all of a sudden, I see two little stick figures – I mean really stick figures. I could draw it for you, you know, just with bent knees, little black lines, tiny heads. And somewhere it said, you know, soul. No, not like that.

MS. RICHARDS: No, not that, but you have some of those stick figures in your paintings.

MS. FRANK: Yeah, but these are really stick. You know, there is no articulation of anything, and done very quickly, about that size.

MS. RICHARDS: A few inches tall?

MS. FRANK: Yeah. And the other, which seems to me were bigger, although in Egyptian art, you have different sizes often at the same time. But it didn't look like anything Egyptian that you know. And I was just – it was just somehow very interesting, because there is so much soul talk in Egyptian art. And I never expected, you know, to see one.

MS. RICHARDS: In your last show – or not last show – the show in 2006 at the gallery, what was it called? It was titled ["Mary Frank: Paintings and Works on Paper"] – I can't find it. Well, I know there was a painting called For the Duration, standing woman, brilliant color.

MS. FRANK: Oh, was she like this?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, yes.

MS. FRANK: It was on the cover of the – on the cover of the brochure.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah.

MS. FRANK: I liked that painting very much.

MS. RICHARDS: That show had a mixture of works.

MS. FRANK: It had wax, encaustic pieces, right?

MS. RICHARDS: Did you recently start using encaustic, or is that something –

MS. FRANK: Fairly recent, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: What prompted that?

MS. FRANK: Well, I was curious about the medium, you know. And I am near Woodstock, you know, where R&F

[Handmade Paints, Kingston, NY] is, where they sell all of those encaustic -

MS. RICHARDS: What is it -

MS. FRANK: R&F. He is really only R, but he called himself R&F because he thought it would sound better. [Laughs.] I like that. R, you can't just be R, right?

MS. RICHARDS: Did you teach yourself how to use it, or had you learned a long time ago?

MS. FRANK: No, I hadn't learned a long time ago. I hadn't used wax. Oh, I used wax in sculpture - completely different, years ago, very different. No, I worked with one or two different people from the studio there. And then I worked on my own. And I haven't gone back. I have a whole bunch of unfinished ones that I would like to go back to, and hope to. I think it is a beautiful medium. A lot of what I see in it I don't find so wonderful, because people use it as a way to do nostalgia. They stick everything -

MS. RICHARDS: Jasper Johns used it a long time ago.

MS. FRANK: He used it very well, yeah. He is not someone I adore, but I like those. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Very early on. Are there other artists right now who are using encaustic in a way that you think is -

MS. FRANK: I am sure there are. I can't think who. I do see quite a bit that I do find very nostalgic looking. I mean, I think it looks like they are using it because you can stick everything in it, which doesn't seem -

MS. RICHARDS: What kinds of works would you think, "I am going to do that in encaustic," versus painting?

MS. FRANK: See, I don't really think like that. I have to get into the medium and then - which usually takes me quite some time to get into a medium, sometimes years because everything has its own, you know, properties. And then I have to find a way that I can use it, you know, which may be the way everybody uses it, or somewhat.

MS. RICHARDS: The subject of autobiography, or elements of autobiography, are woven in and out of your work to different degrees. Is that something that you are conscious of doing, or sometime, not all the time? How does that work? Is there a body of work or a certain approach? You say, you know, "There is something that I want to deal with."

MS. FRANK: No, no, really not. No, things surface. And I can't separate, really, conscious, unconscious. I think when you are working, it is really a mixture I have never quite understood. I mean, there are people who work incredible conceptually. They have this idea, and then they actually go about doing it, you know. But aside from that.

It is interesting. I was reading this book about [Henri] Matisse. It turns out to be the only biography of Matisse. Two books by [Hilary] Spurling. You should get them. You won't believe almost any of it. He was very depressed.

MS. RICHARDS: I won't believe it, in the sense that it contradicts what the general -

MS. FRANK: - what you think you know, yeah. And he said people wouldn't believe it. They're very interesting books. [The Unknown Matisse: A Life of Henri Matisse: The Early Years, 1869-1908. New York: Knopf, 1998; Matisse the Master: A Life of Henri Matisse: The Conquest of Colour, 1909-1954. New York, Knopf, 2005].

MS. RICHARDS: Matisse said?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, Matisse. And it is only now that it is published and done. I mean, it has been written recently, by this English woman who never knew him.

MS. RICHARDS: Whose name is Spurling.

MS. FRANK: Yeah. And the family wouldn't, you know, let all that stuff out. But he talks over and over about how he is working from somewhere that he doesn't know, even though he knew a lot. He knew what he was doing. But over and over, he says often how he didn't know what he was doing.

MS. RICHARDS: And you are saying that, in fact, he is separating any autobiographical, any kind of -

MS. FRANK: Well, no, it wasn't even talking about that aspect, just that - it is not that you can have ideas about everything, of course, but that when he was really working, it came from places that he couldn't have known. That is how it sounds. I mean, it just sounded very familiar to me. And I didn't assume that about him. I mean,

in some work, I would. But he says it a lot. I am not making any comparison to Matisse with myself.

MS. RICHARDS: But he is an artist who you wouldn't have expected that -

MS. FRANK: Not to that degree. Yeah. He says it over and over, that he is working from -

MS. RICHARDS: Was that something he was saying at a certain point in his life?

MS. FRANK: No, I think it runs through quite a lot, at different times. I just think the use of the word "conscious," "unconscious"; the conscious, the unconscious, it is just so - it seems very oversimplified and not very real to me. I mean, they are obviously both working and lots of other things. I don't even know what they are - every new experience, your memory or lack of memory, your horrors, your pleasures.

MS. RICHARDS: People characterize your work as being humanistic. How would you understand that, and do you -

MS. FRANK: Well, I am interested in the human condition, which is rather huge. And I only get to touch on a little bit of it. But in the sense that I can't understand why someone would say - I mean, I don't have anything about some dichotomy of abstract or, you know, figurative work. But I can't understand - I mean, if somebody doesn't want to use figures, fine. But I can't understand why somebody would say, you know, that is over - any of these things where they say, that is over. The novel is over. The music is over. The painting is over. I mean, it is so stupid. It is so boring and so easy to say, you know? Certain kinds of painting may be over. Certain kinds of things.

MS. RICHARDS: What do you think the future of painting might be?

MS. FRANK: I don't know. No idea. I don't go out and look, so I don't even know what is going on. But I think paint as a medium has rather stunning possibilities - has had always, as clay has had, as wood has had. But paint, certainly, is - I mean, I can hardly conceive of some aspect of either human nature or anything else that can't be expressed with paint. I can't, but - I mean, I can't do it. But it has been and I think will be, even if lots of painting - people don't paint anymore, because they are doing whatever else, you know, video or whatever. But it seems to me, its possibilities - and I am including every kind of paint. Don't you think so?

MS. RICHARDS: Did you mention literature? I was wondering about poetry and your readings, and how they have come into your work, if they do?

MS. FRANK: They do. I don't know exactly, maybe, how they do. Sometimes I read quite a bit of poetry, not enough. And I think I am increasingly, with age, more and more and more impressed with what people can do with words. I really am rather stunned, particularly when they can condense it, you know, either in poetry or prose. Sometimes I read a sentence and just, you know - some human being has come up with this.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. FRANK: It is just - yeah. And sometimes a word itself will have that quality for me. I think more than when I was younger.

MS. RICHARDS: What about the sources for your colors, your color choices that you make? I mean, they are obviously not naturalistic.

MS. FRANK: No.

MS. RICHARDS: And they have - they are changing all the time.

MS. FRANK: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: What do you think the -

MS. FRANK: I don't know what to say about them. I want an enormous amount of - from color, but I don't always get it certainly. I find it very - I don't want it to sound - I don't mean it in a soppy way, but it seems the most mysterious, in some ways, of anything - the color, because of relationships. It is always relation -

MS. RICHARDS: If you are seeking a particular effect and you're not getting it, would that prompt you to change mediums at that point in a work?

MS. FRANK: Sometimes, but that is a kind of, sort of, awful restlessness, which doesn't necessarily lead to anything good. It is just like hunting all over instead of following, you know -

MS. RICHARDS: What about religious, to use that word in the broadest sense, resonances and references in your work?

MS. FRANK: Well, it is something that I think about a lot.

MS. RICHARDS: Rituals.

MS. FRANK: Well, I think about it a lot, because I was brought up – I mean, I was told I was Jewish. But I never had any Jewish experience, either with my parents or my grandparents, because my grandfather, who was the son of a Russian rabbi, was really atheist, ethical culture. He made it – I remember him telling me when I was – because I lived with him when I was a little child in Brooklyn – he said when he was buried, he wanted to be known as a good man, not as a good Jew. That is ethical culture, I guess.

But I mean, that is a huge subject, because I think, until recent times, most people believed in some form of afterlife.

MS. RICHARDS: According to polls, there is still somehow a majority who do.

MS. FRANK: They still do. Yes. Well, in this country anyhow and many other countries, yeah. I do think it is a very weird division to make in the world. But I think if you believe in an afterlife of some form or other, or if you don't, it seems to me that is quite major, you know. And I have had friends, certainly, who not only speak to, but speak with their dead mothers or others, and they don't see anything strange about that. And I believe them.

And it is so complex because, of course, so much organized religion is so horrendous. I mean, the worst. But to have to invent everything from scratch without forms is really lonely and disabling. And the community, of course, that religion gives, in its various ways, is staggering. And some of it, of course, is very wonderful. I mean, we were in El Salvador right after the war. And there were all these people who I talked to about that who had seen everything. I mean, they were forced to see it. And in order to intimidate them and – there was no question to me that their religion was a very real community.

[END CD 7.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Mary Frank in New York on West 19th Street, on February 3, 2010, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc eight.

Do you think that this consciousness in thinking about religion, religious feeling, rituals, that thinking about that makes its way into your work?

MS. FRANK: It may. I don't know what form it takes. That would certainly not be a conscious one, because I wouldn't have a clue where to begin. So if it does, maybe because under that huge word, "spiritual," which is tricky. But the degree that we do – most of us anyhow – live materialistically or – so staggering.

MS. RICHARDS: Your last show at DC Moore was called "The Near Far – Portraits and Paintings." Where did that title come from?

MS. FRANK: I think "the near far" is a Chinese – I don't know if it's an expression. I think it's sort of one word for them, whereas we need two, referring to "near far." I think that's right. I might have to look it up again, but that's what I –

MS. RICHARDS: So it was your choice, the title?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, any title is mine, yes, good ones, bad ones. [Laughs.] Yes, I don't know if people understood it, but –

MS. RICHARDS: Why did you pick that idea for that show of portraits?

MS. FRANK: Well, I don't know if it refers as much to the portraits. Maybe it did. I'm not sure I remember now, but lots of things from Chinese, which I don't speak at all, which include the opposites, right, but they don't have to say them as we do, as opposites. In other words, they're compatible, but not –

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think that your next show, or the next body of work, will follow the works in that show?

MS. FRANK: I don't know. It depends what to show, for one thing, in this case.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, yes.

MS. FRANK: I like very much to show paintings, but I'd like to show these recent photographs.

MS. RICHARDS: So let's talk about that project now, the recent photographs, and how that came to be.

MS. FRANK: I haven't talked about it at all.

MS. RICHARDS: No. We talked about it, the two of us, but not as part of the interview.

MS. FRANK: And I showed them to you. I showed you some of them. I have more now.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. FRANK: It really came about because I was painting images on my studio floor in the country, and it was just a pleasure to paint on the floor, not to make a painting. And I painted a head. And I painted a mountain. I painted some walls.

MS. RICHARDS: What was the pleasure you found to paint on the floor?

MS. FRANK: Because it wasn't a thing. The floor continues. A floor probably little bigger than this floor; dirty, not like this floor now, which is astonishingly fresh and clean, but not, you know - dirty, ancient, maybe seven or eight years, but was - and walking - I didn't stop walking on the floor because I was painting it - other people and dogs and boots with ice and all the rest. Yeah, it was a pleasure because lots, maybe, know that I - the way I like timelessness.

There wasn't a border. I mean, it could be a border, but I don't make borders. And then I repainted many of them and will continue to paint over them, painting other images.

But then I started to put things down on them, sometimes flowers in the garden or leaves or sticks, stones, lots of stones, a lot of bluestone there, lots, little pieces, bigger pieces. And then I began to put down drawings, sculptures. And then I didn't really have any idea about taking photographs, being a photographer.

[Audio break.]

In a way, I didn't have any choice except to photograph, because otherwise I kept on moving things around and they just didn't exist; except the only way they would exist would be a photograph. So I became very involved with it.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have a kind of an "A-Ha" moment? That you'd never made works like that before?

MS. FRANK: No, no. No, it was intriguing, and I didn't think of it in terms of, this is going to be a big body of work, blah, blah, blah, blah. I just - it just began accruing. That's mostly how I work, start somewhere and goes -

MS. RICHARDS: When you decided to take photographs, did you have to think what camera and what exposure -

MS. FRANK: Well, yes. Somebody - I got a very cheap digital camera, which wasn't very good, but it was okay, until I dropped it in the water, where I was trying to photograph. Where I was painting - I was using water with a stick on the stones, making watermarks on the stones and that was the end of that camera. Now, I have one that's better, but I find it very confusing.

MS. RICHARDS: Cameras are so complicated.

MS. FRANK: What, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Cameras are so complicated.

MS. FRANK: Yes, it's all digital, but it is hard to me, because I don't really use a computer. I try, but it's very abnormal for me. You know, I never typed. I never - the buttons - I can do a lot of things with my hands, but -

MS. RICHARDS: So you started taking photographs of those compositions that you were creating, and have them printed, and -

MS. FRANK: Yes, first I printed them in the drugstore, and the paper wasn't nice, but the pictures actually were - the color was very good.

MS. RICHARDS: - and at that point you decided to keep doing them, and print them.

MS. FRANK: And then Alan Hoffman started printing for me.

MS. RICHARDS: Alan?

MS. FRANK: Alan Hoffman, that's Elena Zang's partner, the guy.

MS. RICHARDS: And have you continued?

MS. FRANK: And Elena's about to take 10 for the shop. You know they have that shop.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. FRANK: Yes, that's nice.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you continued to make compositions and photograph them, or you're still working -

MS. FRANK: That's what I'm doing, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: But not - but here?

MS. FRANK: Yeah, here. Well, I haven't started working on this floor. I'm working in the front with rocks and potato roots.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, yes, yeah.

MS. FRANK: But it's been very difficult working with - I'm trying, and I will.

MS. RICHARDS: I'm sorry, what was the name of the photographer again? Alan -

MS. FRANK: Well, he's not so much a photographer. He's - anyhow, he's printing. Alan Hoffman, H-O-F-F-M-A-N, A-L-A-N.

MS. RICHARDS: And - but you continued to paint. I can see all around me.

MS. FRANK: I do, but I'm working a lot on things for the photographs.

MS. RICHARDS: What would you say is your biggest challenge in terms of your work now, or challenges?

MS. FRANK: Doing it. [Laughs.] Everybody deals with pain sometimes. You know - believing.

[Audio break.]

MS. RICHARDS: You're saying, when you're older, you want more.

MS. FRANK: I feel like I want more. I always wanted a lot, but when you asked me how I feel about -

MS. RICHARDS: What are your greatest challenges, yes?

MS. FRANK: - yes, I want a lot, and I don't have this whole sense that some of the younger people and some older ones have, which is to make ironic comments on the culture of the world. I just - I'm absolutely minus that. I mean irony can be wonderful, but it's like a heavy clacking chain, I feel, that keeps people down, actually.

MS. RICHARDS: You say you don't go to many exhibitions, but are there certain artists whose work you follow?

MS. FRANK: Well -

MS. RICHARDS: Younger or older?

MS. FRANK: - Irving, Joan Snyder -

MS. RICHARDS: That's Irving Petlin you're talking about.

MS. FRANK: You know, I say that self-critically. I just don't - it's an effort. And I - it's also so overwhelming, and then sometimes when I go, I find it so depressing. And I don't mean that I don't think there's good work. I'm sure there is. But - sometimes I see something good. But I don't go enough to really see what's going on at all. So that I feel sort of cut off, but that's my own -

MS. RICHARDS: Do you make more of a point to take the time to see museum shows?

MS. FRANK: Probably more, but not always that either, but probably more. And for me, like, to go and see where I know I would probably see something - I'm sure I would see something wonderful - it'd [to go] go to the Natural History Museum.

MS. RICHARDS: What areas?

MS. FRANK: Well, depending what's on, but also the – just the collection itself is enough for 90 lifetimes. That's minimum. I'm going to have to stop soon, also, because someone is going to call me, wants to talk to me about that show that's going to be at Woodstock.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, I was going to ask you just a couple more things about Woodstock, in fact. What part do you play in that artists' community? You live there half the time, or less?

MS. FRANK: Probably more than half. Well, it's a wonderful place, and there're many communities within and a lot of terrific people who –

MS. RICHARDS: Many communities, defined by the people in them, the circles of people?

MS. FRANK: Yes, all different – many –

MS. RICHARDS: But what is your – how could you describe your community?

MS. FRANK: Well, some of them are artists, but some of them are – I don't know – lawyers or therapists or people. I don't know, they're not all artists. They're writers. But it's an interesting community because it's a lot of political work, which is important and good, and a lot of support for people within the community, always having – whatever terrible things happen to people's lives. But there's a lot –

MS. RICHARDS: So it's the benefits of a small town.

MS. FRANK: In some ways. In some ways, yes. It has that –

MS. RICHARDS: In terms of closeness, knowing the needs of all of your friends.

MS. FRANK: Well, people are responsive. There are people that are very responsive. We've done a lot of political things. The El Salvador thing was probably the main one, but yes, it's a very alive place. It's many things. There's very, very rich people there. There're also homeless people.

MS. RICHARDS: Talking about –

MS. FRANK: The floor?

MS. RICHARDS: – no, well – and all the work you have stored in all these 66 flat files, have you been thinking about your legacy and how to care for all your works?

MS. FRANK: And I don't want to.

MS. RICHARDS: But you have been doing some of it?

MS. FRANK: Well, I've been forced to, because I got these things through the Joan Mitchell Foundation that someone's going to come help me –

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, I didn't know that.

MS. FRANK: Yes, yes. It hasn't happened yet, but it's supposed to. And that's fantastic.

MS. RICHARDS: They're going to help you archive.

MS. FRANK: I don't know. The thing is, I don't want to spend my whole time doing it. The ways I care and the ways I don't care. I don't think I care as much as many – I don't know. I can't say that. It doesn't mean anything. No, I think it's a burden. That's what I think, particularly sculpture, more than painting.

MS. RICHARDS: So what do you envision this person's going to do when they come?

MS. FRANK: Oh, I don't know. We'll see. But I hope they do it.

MS. RICHARDS: Not just advise you, but actually do it.

MS. FRANK: I think they will do something, but it's limited, what they can do – there's so much. But I don't like going back looking – sometimes I find it very – it doesn't help me work.

MS. RICHARDS: We didn't touch on, at all, all the books that you were involved in as an illustrator and collaborating on. Do you want to spend a few minutes talking about –

MS. FRANK: Yes, because I love doing books.

MS. RICHARDS: – how meaningful they were. Early, early on, you did children's books illustrations.

MS. FRANK: Yes, those are nice, but the books that are really interesting is Hayden's [Hayden Herrera] book and the book I did with Peter Matthiessen.

MS. RICHARDS: Called Shadows of Africa [New York: Abrams, 1992].

MS. FRANK: Yes, those are beautiful – they're beautifully made books. And they're gone. But I did find a bunch of – while looking for other stuff, I found a bunch – which is nice. But then I did the book with the poetry of Emily Dickinson.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, Desert Quartet [: An Erotic Landscape. Terry Tempest Williams. New York: Pantheon Books, 1995]?

MS. FRANK: No, that's a different one.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, Skies in Blossom, yes, The Nature Poetry of Emily Dickinson [Jonathan Cott. New York: Doubleday, 1995].

MS. FRANK: Yes, and then a catalogue called Experiences. Is that the one Linda Nochlin did? One is Experiences [Martica Swain. Richmond: University of Richmond Museums, 2002], and one is Encounters [Linda Nochlin. New York: Abrams, 2000]. I get them mixed. And I can give you one of them. One of them – I have some extras here if you want. And one is a catalogue from the show in Virginia, which was a very nice show of a lot of the triptychs, and written by Martica Sawin. You know her?

MS. RICHARDS: No.

MS. FRANK: She's a very good writer. She really writes very nice.

MS. RICHARDS: Tell me the name again.

MS. FRANK: S-A-W-I-N.

MS. RICHARDS: And her first name?

MS. FRANK: Martica. She did a big show in the Reina Sofia in Madrid of Surrealism. She's done a number of things, surrealism in this country, early on, but also a lot of painters. But I think she writes very well.

MS. RICHARDS: So you're very excited when you think about doing these collaborations. You said they're really important to you.

MS. FRANK: Yes, because otherwise you work alone always, but I don't have anyone to work with right now. It's something I'd like to. I'd like to do a book with the photographs eventually, yes, and someone to write it.

MS. RICHARDS: And what is the nature of –

MS. FRANK: Collaborative work?

MS. RICHARDS: – yes, for you.

MS. FRANK: Another mind, another person.

MS. RICHARDS: And how did you work, with a writer, let's say?

MS. FRANK: A lot. With Hayden, a lot; we talked and talked.

MS. RICHARDS: – well, let's say, for example, with Peter Matthiessen.

MS. FRANK: Also, a lot of talk. It was different because he had – those writings existed. They weren't writings about my work. They were writings about Africa and animals.

MS. RICHARDS: Right, yes.

MS. FRANK: But we were talking about which pictures and what painting, sculpture, drawings, prints.

MS. RICHARDS: And, of course, you reach a completely different audience or maybe somewhat overlapping.

MS. FRANK: Yes, yes, yes. I have a lot of admiration for him.

MS. RICHARDS: So - and you're saying you'd love to do a book - another book about your new work, your photographs?

MS. FRANK: I would, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Who would you pick? Would you pick an art writer, or would you pick someone completely different?

MS. FRANK: Not necessarily; depends who would be - I mean, he wrote this - I showed you the little beautiful thing that he wrote. That wasn't really - well, it was about the photographs, but it wasn't only about the photographs, really. It was more, sort of, general. He wouldn't write a book. I know. It was amazing that he gave me that, actually, because doesn't usually do that. But I don't know who I would - it would be a matter of finding someone who has a strong, strong response. I have no idea. Do you have any thoughts?

MS. RICHARDS: I'll let you know.

MS. FRANK: If you do -

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, yes.

MS. FRANK: - if you think of someone who you think might be interested to see them, I'll -

MS. RICHARDS: Is there a project that you sort of - this is my last question - that you kind of dream about, that you would love to do that you haven't done, a kind of a dream project or a big goal, maybe it's -

MS. FRANK: I don't think so. I think a big goal would be more solar cookers than my work, really, because I think that's urgently needed all over the world. And I'm not sure if my work is urgently needed all over the world at all. I don't say that out of humbleness. It's just a fact.

MS. RICHARDS: Is there anything else you'd like to say?

MS. FRANK: No, I think it's been good, actually, talking with you. You made me think about a lot of things, some of it hard.

MS. RICHARDS: Thank you.

MS. FRANK: Thank you.

[END CD 8.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated...April 15, 2011