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Oral history interview with Louise Fishman,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a digitally recorded interview with Louise Fishman on December 21, 2009. The interview took place at the artist's studio in New York, New York, and was conducted by Judith Olch 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.

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

Interview

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Louise Fishman on December 21, 2009, in her studio at 526 West 26th, Street, New York City, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc one.

Good morning, Louise.

LOUISE FISHMAN: Hi.

MS. RICHARDS: I'd like to start with your talking about your family background, your parents, your grandparents, as far back as you know, and the knowledge that you grew up with as a child about your family.

MS. FISHMAN: You know, I didn't really know a whole lot about my grandparents. No one really talked that much about the history. But I did find things out later. Both sets of grandparents came from Russia. My mother's father came over when he was 14, with a brother, I think, or maybe two brothers.

MS. RICHARDS: About what date would that be?

MS. FISHMAN: Well, let's see. My father was - my mother was born in '16, I think, so - and she was the youngest, so I would say - and the oldest - I don't know the difference in age actually, but it must have been 10 years, over 10 years before. And I spoke to my grandfather, who I was very close to. Abraham Fisher is his name.

MS. RICHARDS: Fisher?

MS. FISHMAN: Yes. There were lots of children. They all came -

MS. RICHARDS: This is your paternal grandfather?

MS. FISHMAN: No, my maternal.

MS. RICHARDS: Your mother. Oh.

MS. FISHMAN: And I spent a lot of time with him and my grandmother because they lived in Atlantic City [NJ] when he retired. He used to work - he was a ladies' tailor, and he was a union organizer. My mother filled me in on that. He worked in a shop, you know, a sweatshop, and in the summers, I know my mother was out of school and worked with him.

MS. RICHARDS: Where did they live?

MS. FISHMAN: Philadelphia [PA] - oh, we didn't go through - the family didn't go through Ellis Island [NY]. They all came through Philadelphia ports. And he - my grandmother's name was Rebecca, so it was Abraham and Rebecca. I'm trying to remember her maiden name. But he never learned how to write and read English.

MS. RICHARDS: Did they meet in Russia before they came?

MS. FISHMAN: They met here. She had come over - her family came over earlier, and she spoke English very beautifully, and she read and wrote. They both became citizens, but he never learned how to read. I don't know how that happened, actually.

MS. RICHARDS: So he spoke and wrote in Yiddish or Russian?

MS. FISHMAN: He didn't really write. I mean, I wrote him a postcard. I didn't know this. But when I was - I don't

know where I was. I was out someplace. And I wrote him a postcard, and at the end of it I wrote, "Long live the czar." I was joking. And when I went to Atlantic City the next time, he said to me, "Louise, the czar is dead." [Laughs.] And apparently he took the postcard to my Aunt Edith, my mother's sister-in-law, to translate it so that he knew what I was saying.

And I would sit with him on his little porch, and they - neither side had very much money. And none of their children went through high school except for my mother and my father. They were the first in both families. They were the babies. There was a little space between the last - their siblings and them, so they were sort of fawned on, and they were very good-looking both of them, very smart, and they got special treats. And they both got to finish high school.

The rest of their families, I don't know, including my aunt, who was an important painter, my father's sister - she didn't go through high school. In fact, she worked to send my father to a business school so he could become an accountant.

MS. RICHARDS: Going back to your grandfather, Abraham Fisher, married to Rebecca, did they have other - you were saying they had other children besides your father. He was the youngest. And did they all live in -

MS. FISHMAN: But my maternal - that was my mother.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. FISHMAN: That would be -

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, sorry. Okay. Did Abraham -

MS. FISHMAN: Yes. The first child, I think, was Goldie, then Walter, Irving, Yetta, and my mother's name is Gertrude. And my grandfather could hardly pronounce these names, including - Gertrude. He called her Goitshe. [Laughs.] I don't know how - my grandmother must have picked the names. It must have been - you know, it was from some Yiddish or Hebrew names from someone who died, obviously.

But the way I found that out that he couldn't pronounce them is that we were sitting on his little porch in Atlantic City - and he was also kind of an atheist, oddly, had a lot of disdain for religious Jews. Well he was a lefty [Leftist]. And we were sitting on the porch, and he turned to me, and he said, "Goldie" - he said, "oh, Yetta - Goitshe, Laveese." [Laughs.] So, you know, he went through a lot of - and he went through some of my cousins' names, too, before he got to me. But I thought, he doesn't know how to pronounce these names, [laughs] any of them, really. But it was sweet.

And I asked him questions, because I didn't know anything, and my mother didn't know anything, really. He had several brothers. He came from Russia. I said, "What was Russia like?" He said, "I don't want to remember." I said, "Why?" He said, "I don't remember anything."

MS. RICHARDS: He was very young when he left, too.

MS. FISHMAN: Fourteen. And I said, "Well, you must remember something. Can you speak Russian?" "No." I said, "Zada [Yiddish for grandfather], you must remember some Russian." You were not a child when you left. That was a grown man in those terms and those years. And he said to me, "Ne ponimaesh [ph]," which means, I guess, "I don't understand." That was what he said. He said, "That's what I remember."

And the other thing he said was, "I remember potatoes." We ate potatoes all the time, potato latkes, potato kugel, baked potatoes, fried potatoes, boiled potatoes. He hated potatoes.

And I remember this - I remember where this comes from. It's a novel about Russia, and it was about a woman with a great big dress, and there was a baked - she kept the baked potatoes warm, like, on the floor, under this dress. I'll never forget that image, but that's what I started thinking about, that same thing. It comes up in the same paragraph of my thoughts about him.

He was a ladies' tailor in Russia as a young man, and he came over, and that's what he did. And his wife, Rebecca, her parents, I think, came to the United States earlier. I don't think his parents did. They both had many siblings. I barely knew them. Some of them were still alive.

My grandfather, Abraham, had one brother who worked in this shop, but he was a manager, and he was on the side of the boss, and they never spoke after that. You know, my grandfather was doing the organizing. It was the ladies' garment workers' union, is what I figured. And this guy - I don't remember his name even. I don't even know if I ever met him. I've met his daughter, but I didn't meet him.

And the only thing I remember about my grandmother's family is that there were - I think they must have been

cousins, but they were the seven ladies, the seven girls. There was a family that had seven girls, and none of them married. And they lived together, and the family referred to them as "the girls" always, when they were in their 70s and 80s and whatever. I never met any of them either.

MS. RICHARDS: They all lived in Philadelphia, as well?

MS. FISHMAN: Atlantic City or Philadelphia. I'm not sure. I know so little. It's really a shame. And I asked him, my grandfather, where he came from in Russia. And he said, "I don't know. Minsk-Pinsk." So I figured it was probably outside of Minsk. I don't think he lived in the city, because he was on a farm. Or maybe he wasn't. He was a tailor. I don't know. It's really a mystery.

There was one aunt who was married to my Uncle Irving, my mother's favorite brother. Both of her brothers were very - she was very close to. His wife, Edith, somehow or other took an interest in the genealogy, and she, for instance, told me that they didn't come through Ellis Island. They all came through Philadelphia. And whatever I knew about the Fisher family, I found out from her. It wasn't much, but at least she made an attempt.

What else do I know about that? I had cousins. I still have cousins. I'm not very close to anybody in the family except for one cousin, a second cousin of mine, who - my mother's oldest sister, Goldie, broke her back riding a tricycle when she was about five or four or something and wore a brace for a long time, and when they took the brace off, she had a hunchback, and so she was very short, not disabled. And got married. They told her she'd never have children, and she had a daughter named Bella. And so Bella was my mother's closest friend. She was close in age to my mother, even though she was her niece.

And Bella's daughter, Lorie, is someone who - for instance, when the "High Times, Hard Times [: New York Paintings 1967-1975]" show was in Washington [DC, Katzen Center, American University] - she lives outside of Washington - she came to the show with me, the opening. She's come to other shows. She's very interested in my work, and we're close.

I had a wonderful cousin. She's just turned into a mess, Sandy, who was Yetta's daughter. She was about five years older than I, but when I went to - we used to have a wonderful time together. They lived around the corner from us. I lived in West Oak Lane [Philadelphia]. We all lived in West Oak Lane.

MS. RICHARDS: West Oak Lane?

MS. FISHMAN: West Oak Lane is a Jewish - sort of a Jewish ghetto, had little row houses. And my cousin Sandy and her family, Yetta and Hank, lived on Bouvier Street, two streets over.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you spell that?

MS. FISHMAN: B-O-U-V-I-E-R. And we lived on Smedley Street, S-M-E-D-L-E-Y. So we were very close; when there were snowstorms, we would be riding a sled together, and we had a great time.

And then when I went to Atlantic City - my parents used to leave me there for a week or two in the summers. I loved it. And Sandy sometimes would come, and she would stay with her friends because she was a little older. And we used to do things together. And the funniest stories of my childhood are from Sandy and what happened then.

One time we went - she was a little silly, and more than a little silly, maybe not the smartest kid on the block. And she - we went to the - you know, there were these piers that had amusement parks on them and all these rides. So she and I went on the Ferris wheel. And we were at the top of the Ferris wheel, and it stopped, and we were going back and forth like this, you know, in this little carriage or whatever it's called. And they were - bless you.

MS. RICHARDS: Excuse me.

MS. FISHMAN: They were starting to unload people, but they did it very slowly, like two at a time would get out, and then they'd move the Ferris Wheel. And so we were up in the air for a long time. For me, it was nothing. It was fun. I was looking all - she was hysterical and scared to death and just laughing, giggling, and peed in her pants. And she was not a young person, and it was not the first time that it happened, but anyway. We got very close to the bottom, and she said to me, "Louise, when we get out, run." [Laughs.]

And then the second time that we had - she invited me to go on a double date. I must have been almost 15, maybe younger. And she was 18 or 19, maybe older. And she brought these dates to my grandparents' house. Well, this guy was 24. [Laughs.] And I was sort of a tomboy. I didn't know how to dress. She had to come over. She put makeup on me, told me what to wear. She gave me some clothes, and they primed me on - when I was actually born, so that I could be 21.

MS. RICHARDS: She did all this because she wanted a double date -

MS. FISHMAN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: It was better for her to have a double date?

MS. FISHMAN: I think so. I'm not sure. She really liked me. And so partly she was trying to engage me or something, but I think it probably also had to do with that.

She spent her early teenage years by the phone. She never left the phone because, like, she met people, and they had the phone number, and then she just sat by the phone because she didn't want to miss a call. And it always amazed me, because she had no life outside of the boys. And her father, who was a jerk - her parents - she didn't get a good set of parents; actually, neither one of them [laughs] were beauties, as we say in my family.

Anyhow - and I was very nervous, but I thought it would be fun, because she is a lot of fun. So we went out, and they said, "Where would you like to go?" And she said, "I want to go to the Jockey Club." Well, I knew, I think, that the Jockey Club - no. I didn't. I didn't actually know. It was a gay club, and it was a drag club that straight people went to. There was a drag performer.

So we get there, and she's, like, giggling, "Oh, you're going to love this. I was really waiting for you to see" - and we go in, and the waiter comes over and takes our order. And I'm looking at the waiter's hands, and it's a woman's hands. And she says - and she goes, "Did you see? Did you see?" And I already had questions about my sexuality by then, and so it was very interesting to me. You know, there was a drag stage show - which I had never seen. And I was fascinated. It was all showbiz. I mean, this was, you know -

MS. RICHARDS: Professional.

MS. FISHMAN: Totally professional. And then afterwards we went and we drank. I had to lie about my age, and so I had a drink of some sort. And then we went to someplace to get hamburgers or whatever we did.

And I remember going - I had to go to the bathroom, and so I went to the - what I thought was the ladies' room, and I was in a stall, and there was no toilet paper. And I said, thinking it was Sandy next to me, "Could you pass me some toilet paper," and a man's hand came under this - and in those years - I mean, this was the early '50s - that was just unbelievable. And so I walked out of there. I was just stunned that this guy had handed me toilet paper. That was my - and I was exhausted. And of course, the mascara was all over my face by then. [Laughs.] This guy wanted to date me again, and I said, no, I didn't think so. [Laughs.]

Anyway, Sandy - I mean, she was sort of a troublemaker, but - and my grandmother was very protective. She was very smart, a very smart woman. I loved my grandmother. She was very special, very special. My grandfather -

MS. RICHARDS: It's still your mother's side.

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah. I love that family, but I didn't really maintain any friendships, because the children ended up not being so interesting. And some of them are Republicans, and I was like, oh, how did this happen in this family? You know, my grandfather would turn over in his grave.

And my grandmother, I remember - you know, I was very close to - my Uncle Irving and my Aunt Edith lived in Atlantic City. They had a shoe store, Irv Fisher's Shoes. And that's why my grandparents retired there, because their son and his family were there.

And they had a - they used to have - before they had the shoe store, they had a little - like a little grocery store. And they owned the building, and they lived on the top floor, and you'd walk up an outside stairway to get to their apartment. And I loved that there was an outside stairway. There was something so exciting about that.

MS. RICHARDS: You obviously weren't afraid of heights, with the Ferris wheel story.

MS. FISHMAN: No. I don't think so. I really like that. And I loved - I have memories, and they're odd little memories.

For instance, I adored Atlantic City. First of all, my parents were not easy to be around. My mother was really difficult and cold and competitive, and it wasn't fun-loving exactly, there, but when I went to Atlantic City, it was a lot of fun, and people really loved me. It was a lot of affection and joking and playing.

One of the memories I have that I just - it's inexplicable; it's probably one of the things that ends up in a person's work - is the trolley tracks had sand in them. And we had to cross the trolley tracks to go to the beach

because they were, I don't know, maybe four or five blocks from the beach, maybe further. They were what was probably the black neighborhood then, and there was a huge - and there probably still is - big - it was like the South, real poverty, totally black area.

So those tracks, there was something about those trolley tracks and the sand, walking in my bare feet across these tracks that was so - I had such a love for. Isn't it odd? And of course, there was a jitney that went along Pacific Avenue.

Well, the three children that they had, Normy, Marty, and Lois - they were all beautiful. That's how I remember them. They were always tan. They had dark hair, and they were very handsome, all of them. They looked like berries, you know, brown berries. They were just so appealing and energetic. And they used to take me to the beach, and we'd play in the ocean. I mean, we all swam a lot and dived into the water, into the waves.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you go there every summer?

MS. FISHMAN: Every summer. Yeah. We went to two places -

MS. RICHARDS: But you didn't stay the whole summer. You just -

MS. FISHMAN: Oh, never. Never.

MS. RICHARDS: - stayed a week or so.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes. And my parents used to drive down on the weekend, not every weekend, but periodically on the weekend, and we - because my father was working all the time.

MS. RICHARDS: Let me ask you, just to catch up with the grandparents on your father's side of the family, and then we'll go back to your childhood and the summers and all that and your parents.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes. That's one of the nicest memories I have, actually, that Atlantic City business. But I still adore Atlantic City, even though I don't go there. It's just like a romance in my head.

My father's family, entirely different story. They were a little classier. They didn't have money, but they came from - my grandparents were married in Russia. My grandmother's name was Rose Fishman. And my grandfather's name was Louis Fishman and I was named after him. He was a - they lived in a little shtetl, in a little town called Lodizhen, which is -

MS. RICHARDS: Could you try to spell that?

MS. FISHMAN: Yes. L-O-D-I-Z-H-E-N. And that's rough. I've seen in on the map. It's maybe a little different than that, but that's what I remember. And the only reason I know that is because my aunt told me, my Aunt Razel, because my parents - they didn't seem to have any interest, although when I mentioned it to my father once, he said, "Oh, yes." They used to - I always heard Lodizhen, Lodizhen, because they talked about it around the house. I never heard anything really.

And my grandmother was a very strong woman, tall, blonde. My mother recently said that I take after her more than anybody else in the family. I mean, as I get older, I guess I'm more like - I look more like the Fishman side of the family, my father, a lot like my father, and my aunt probably, although she had a nose job early on because she had sinus problems, and I think that's why she had a nose job.

MS. RICHARDS: Your aunt, the sister of Rose?

MS. FISHMAN: Razel. Rose's daughter.

MS. RICHARDS: And so they came here after they were married. And what profession - what did you -

MS. FISHMAN: Well, here's the story. They were - my grandfather was a Talmudic scholar and a butcher. Now, I don't know if he was a butcher in Russia. He was a butcher in Philadelphia. Now, he may have been a butcher in Russia. I don't know.

But he was a scholar, and he was considered a catch, because he was - that was, like, much more value than businessman. And he had red hair, from what I understand.

She was sort of classy, I think, because she knew five or six languages. They lived in a shtetl. I don't know how one learns that, but that's what I've heard, that she spoke five or six languages. She was very smart.

They had to leave Russia because of him - I mean, I guess maybe they wanted him in the army or whatever. And

by then - my father hadn't been born yet. My father was born in Philadelphia.

And so their children were David, Hymie - Herman is it in English, but Hymie was what he was referred to - and Razel. And the three of them and my grandmother came to Philadelphia by way of Hamburg [Germany]. They got a ship from Hamburg, and they apparently spent time in jail in Hamburg, for some reason.

My grandfather went to Odessa [Ukraine]. The town they came from, Lodizhen, was between Odessa and Kiev [Ukraine]. And he went to Odessa and took a ship to Argentina.

MS. RICHARDS: So the rest of the family went through Hamburg, but he took a ship from Odessa to Argentina, even though they'd already been married.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes. There was a - what do they call that - like a companion for my grandmother, not a companion. Someone who acted as a surrogate husband, didn't pretend to be, but protected her, I guess. I don't know who that person was.

But the problem was that they couldn't leave together because of political reasons, and so he had to escape. Imagine what that - one of the millions of stories of how people got out of Russia and every other country in Europe.

And so he - and I sort of figured out a few things about him afterwards. All I knew from my aunt was that he was a gaucho, and he lived in Argentina for a year or two and then came up through South America and landed in Texas. I guess he had relatives in Texas. I've never found them. There are a lot of Fishmans, and there was a relative in England. My grandmother had one. And so there's no family that has survived. It's just me and my brother.

And then my grandfather came to Philadelphia to meet my grandmother. There were apparently some relatives in Philadelphia. And my father was born in Philadelphia. And he became my grandfather's assistant, not in the butcher shop. In the shul. He taught -

MS. RICHARDS: Your father's name?

MS. FISHMAN: Edward. And he taught these young boys to speak Hebrew and to learn their Maftir, and he worked in the synagogue with my grandfather, and I think he was a religious man. They were orthodox.

And my grandfather developed tuberculosis, and he died in his 40s or something. I mean, he was young, a young man. And my grandmother took over the butcher's shop.

It was a little neighborhood, you know, that a lot of Jews lived in. And my mother has a memory of her mother taking her to this butcher shop - that's where they got their meat - and that's the only time she ever met my grandfather.

MS. RICHARDS: And he died young.

MS. FISHMAN: He died young from tuberculosis. And later when I was talking to my father, you know, we didn't have a very religious upbringing, although we went to shul all the time - it was a conservative shul - my father never taught us a thing and didn't have interest in religion. And much later, when my father was already beginning to have Alzheimer's - he died of Alzheimer's in June -

MS. RICHARDS: This past June?

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah. I said, "Daddy, how come you don't even go to shul" - you know, they moved to Florida. First they were just going there in the winters, and then they were staying longer and longer. They never lived there full time until my father - until we put my father in a home, and then my mother started to stay there most of the year. He lived there full time, of course, and she would come back to Philadelphia for a while. She doesn't return anymore. It's too hard for her.

MS. RICHARDS: When did they meet, your mother and father, or how did they -

MS. FISHMAN: In grade school. [Laughs.] They knew each other. And my mother, who's been writing little journals lately - she'll be 94 next month and is an artist also. She's been - that's a long story. She's been writing like little - she calls them short stories, but they're really about her childhood.

And so she said that she remembers this little kid they called "Whitey" - his hair was so blonde, they called him Whitey. He was real skinny, and she remembers that none of the girls wanted to hold his hand because it was always dirty because he played baseball, and he was an athlete. And that's what she remembers about him. They went to the same school, Kelly Public School, in Philadelphia. And she told me stories about how they got

together, which is really very sweet.

I mean, she was extremely popular. She went out with all these jazz musicians. She went out with boxers, all these guys that were attracted to her, wanted to marry her, who were sobbing that she wouldn't marry them. I mean, she was very independent. And she just was having a great time. She was going to hear jazz.

MS. RICHARDS: Did she study art?

MS. FISHMAN: No. She apparently took a class with my aunt once, my father's sister. But later she went to the Barnes Foundation [Philadelphia], but she didn't have a formal, like, studio training except with my aunt, and not much. I don't think my aunt taught her that much.

MS. RICHARDS: Your aunt had more formal training?

MS. FISHMAN: No. She is - that's a whole story. We could talk about this all day. But my mother just started painting on her own, started drawing. My aunt studied with David Siqueiros, when he came to New York City.

MS. RICHARDS: When exactly were you born, your birth date?

MS. FISHMAN: Nineteen thirty-nine.

MS. RICHARDS: Your birth date.

MS. FISHMAN: January 14, 1939.

MS. RICHARDS: And in Philadelphia in the same neighborhood?

MS. FISHMAN: I was born in West Philadelphia. Well, no. Yeah. It was a Jewish hospital in Philadelphia, and I think - you know, I'm a little confused with what my mother's been saying, but they had an apartment briefly, but I think they lived with my grandparents, which was also in Philadelphia, in the beginning. It was actually - yes, it was North Philadelphia, before my grandparents moved to the house that they were in for a long time, with a big porch.

MS. RICHARDS: And you said you have a brother. Did you have other siblings?

MS. FISHMAN: No. Just a brother.

MS. RICHARDS: Are you the older or the younger?

MS. FISHMAN: I'm the older. And I actually pretended I didn't have a brother for a long time. I didn't actively pretend. I just never mentioned him, including to my therapist.

MS. RICHARDS: How much younger is he?

MS. FISHMAN: Four and a half years.

MS. RICHARDS: And his name?

MS. FISHMAN: Joe. His first name -

MS. RICHARDS: Joseph?

MS. FISHMAN: Steven Joseph Fishman, but he went by Joe. S. Joseph Fishman is how he signs things. I wasn't happy when he came along, for a number of reasons. I had all this attention. I was so pretty and smart, and then, you know, they had this baby, and it was boy. Of course, everybody's waiting for a boy.

And I lost all of their attention, partly because Joe was born with some kind of disability. I mean, he's smart, but he had trouble reading. He had temper tantrums. He was bumping into things a lot. There was some kind of motor problem.

I mean, I didn't really know that until I - the woman that I lived with for 23 years had a son who was born - I don't know, four months early. He was a preemie. And he had disabilities. And she had done a lot of work with disabled kids. In fact, she became the associate commissioner for Mental Health and Mental Retardation Services in New York, the city of New York and state of New York, so she knew a lot -

MS. RICHARDS: What is her name?

MS. FISHMAN: Betsy Crowell. C-R-O-W-E-L-L. And she looked at his handwriting one time, and she said, "He can

barely make it." It's like uphill all the time, like he can hardly write. Look at his handwriting.

And I realized my father had a very bad handwriting, but that because he was a lefty and they made him write with his right hand, so he insisted on writing with his right hand. He threw with his left hand. But his handwriting was - he struggled with it. My brother struggled, but because of some other thing.

MS. RICHARDS: So that caused even more attention to be on him.

MS. FISHMAN: They were totally focused, because he was crying, he was falling and having - cracking his head - and he was getting into things. I was a totally good kid; I was smart. I was attentive. I was disciplined. I mean, I did have - apparently had - I don't know, had some kind of - what is it called when kids cry all the time? There's some kind of - not croup but something that causes a lot of pain [colic], and so I was a difficult baby. But other than that, I was good. I was rebellious, but I was good.

He needed a lot of help, and my mother devoted her life to him. She really did. I mean, she, I think instinctively, knew something was wrong and probably thought it was her fault. My father used to make fun of him. I mean, my father - there's a lot to talk about that, but anyway it's not that - and he kind of had a rough deal because my mother infantilized him.

And I remember that when women came to the door, a woman came to the door, a friend, whoever it was, he would scream, "Don't let her in!" and run in the other room. He just, like, developed a hatred for women. I think - it had to have been Mother. It's all I can think.

MS. RICHARDS: You said you didn't even mention your brother to your therapist. Were you embarrassed by your brother? You think that was -

MS. FISHMAN: I was angry. I was angry more than anything. And he wasn't a playmate, you know; like he couldn't play ball. You know, I was the athlete. It was embarrassing. He was not - he wasn't made that way.

And the boys in the neighborhood, my age, would come - or his age - would come ask if I was - if I could come out and play, and they never asked him to come out, so it was hard for him. You know, and I was smart and he didn't feel like he was. He had trouble in school. He got into a lot of trouble, but I also defended him. I beat up a kid who had taken advantage of him in some way, only because I - I mean, I wasn't a fighter.

People thought I was, because I look tough, and I was a little athlete, and they - this little gang of kids came to me one day, and they said, Marshall beat up - not Marshall but some other kid - beat up your brother. What are you going to do about it? I said, "Show me where he is. Take me to him." [Laughs.] Big talker. But what am I going to do when I get there?

And it was a kid older than me, a boy, older than me, bigger than me, and I fought him. But what I did is, I pinned him on the ground, and I couldn't hit him. So I said, "Okay. Say 'uncle.'" [Laughs.] And the crowd, this little crowd of children accepted that. They felt that was good. I got him to say "uncle." I mean, it was really an embarrassing moment. But I did, and my brother never forgot it, that I had defended him.

I mean, some man had tied him up, and that was another incident. I don't know what happened. It was on the street, and somebody - my father and I went right out. My father was - I don't know what happened there, but he just wasn't - he couldn't take care of himself very well. He's fine. He's not exactly fine, but he survived very well considering the disabilities. There are lots of stories about that.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were in elementary school, did you show artistic talent? Was art a favorite subject?

MS. FISHMAN: No. I liked - my mother always had me painting. She saved everything I ever did. But in elementary school they wouldn't let me write with a pen. I had to write with a pencil because I wasn't neat enough, and they never put my little paintings up. They put other people's paintings up and never mine, because it wasn't neat enough. And I was sort of mortified.

And then the other story about my art education. When I was in kindergarten, there was a play period, and you could do one of two things: you could crayon, or you could play in the dollhouse. And they had a big doll house that you could walk into, and there were all these things. I had no interest in the dollhouse. I wanted to crayon.

But the teacher had put our last names, or maybe - I don't know, put our names - printed them on the box, and I couldn't read my name. And the other kids seemed to know their names, and I never crayoned for a year because I didn't - I never spoke to the teacher about anything.

I didn't say very much that I can remember. I remember my mother used to pin notes on me, and the teacher would pin another note back, and I didn't speak. And I had this idea that if I sat by this crayon cabinet, that one day everyone would crayon, and there would be one box left, and I would memorize my name.

I never asked my mother. I don't think I asked my mother for anything. I mean, I don't remember a dialogue. And I don't know why that was. There was some trauma going on somewhere, which I haven't really figured out exactly, but I was - I remember one story that was more positive, in a way, which was during the rest period.

You know, a lot of kids had blankets, and I didn't have a blanket. And there was one girl who had two blankets. So I said, "Let me have your other blanket." And she said, "No, these are my blankets. So I took one of her blankets, because I thought this, is only fair. She has two. I need one.

And the teacher took me aside, and it turns out that she moved me from the early kindergarten, which was the afternoon session, to the morning session, so I got bumped up a semester [laughs] because I - and I think - I always thought it was because I had taken that girl's blanket, but it may have been because my mother had taught me how to read.

MS. RICHARDS: But you didn't know your name.

MS. FISHMAN: I couldn't read my name, but I could read from a book.

MS. RICHARDS: That's interesting. Your mother taught you to read. Although she really wasn't paying attention to you, she was, in fact, because she taught you to read.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes. In fact, I remember her reading to me and teaching me a few things. And I remember her saying, "Louise, when you learn how to read, you can learn about everything in the world." I was like, oh, boy. Wait until that happens. How exciting. But I found - I think I had - I think that I have ADD [Attention Deficit Disorder] or something because it's been hard for me - I do have to struggle to - you know.

MS. RICHARDS: To focus.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: So through elementary school, you were most interested, besides sports, in what subjects, and, I guess, going into junior high?

MS. FISHMAN: I hated school, so I don't know that I had a favorite subject.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you hate it because you didn't really like the academic part of it, or was it the social part that made you hate it?

MS. FISHMAN: I was terrified of school. I was terrified that someone would call on me, that someone would see me. I used to hide behind everybody; [laughs] you know, if we had a choice where to sit at the beginning of the semester, I would sit back of the tallest kid in the back, the back corner, because I didn't want the teacher to see me.

MS. RICHARDS: You said you did well, though.

MS. FISHMAN: I was a good student for the first five years of elementary school. And I used to read to the class, you know, early on, like the first couple of grades, because I was a good reader. And because I probably - because I was a pretty little blonde girl, I was picked to be in these shows that they had.

But the odd thing about it is I - they would - someone would come into the classroom and the teacher would say, Louise, would you come up here please? And then that person would take me, and we would - I didn't understand what it was. We were rehearsing. I didn't know that we were rehearsing for a performance. I didn't ask any questions about why it was me, what we were doing, what it was about. I never told my mother. They pinned notes on me, the notes got back and forth, and then there would be a performance.

And I remember two things that I was in. One, I was in a minuet with a wig, powdered wig, and a little dress, a minuet dress, and had to dance a minuet. And the other time I was in the Nutcracker Suite [Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky]; I was the teddy bear or something. I had to do a lot of -

MS. RICHARDS: Did you enjoy those things? You said you were extremely shy in the classroom. Did you enjoy these performing events?

MS. FISHMAN: I think - I don't remember them very well. I just was shocked that I was in front of people. I mean, I didn't enjoy that. I don't think I minded the rehearsals. I don't remember them. I don't remember a whole lot. That's one of the big problems that I've realized over the years. I don't remember very much.

MS. RICHARDS: When you left that school, you said you went for five years? Yes.

MS. FISHMAN: What happened, my father decided he wanted to be more upwardly mobile, and so we moved from this neighborhood, which we all loved, the school I was familiar with, kids I knew, the street. I played bottle tops in the street. That was my big game. That, and I was just a good athlete, and everything.

And we moved to Havertown [PA], which was a suburb that was the beginning of the first Jewish suburb out in that area. It was built on a - it was a development on what was a golf course in basically a neighborhood of the goyim [non-Jew], if you excuse the expression. But, you know, when I went to school, there were - I knew the other Jews. There were three of them, Marsha Ziegler, Lynne Cohen, and Elaine Feinstein. And I went to Chestnutwald Day School or something -

MS. RICHARDS: I'm sorry. Marsha Ziegler and -

MS. FISHMAN: Elaine Feinstein, who was my next-door neighbor. And we were really fish out of water. I was a fish out of the water more than they were, but I mean, that was it. And I did very poorly, because they had a whole different system. I didn't - I don't know why, but I don't remember having the kind of homework that they gave us. It was like old-fashioned schooling.

And I know that, for instance, one of the teachers, at least, had a ruler, and she'd smack your knuckles if you misbehaved. I was so terrified, I never - I was, like, practically holding my breath.

MS. RICHARDS: That was junior high or high school?

MS. FISHMAN: No. It was grade school. It was the last year, sixth grade. And I did excel in sports, and I did meet - I had a friend, Carol Beck, who - when she found out I was Jewish, said to me, "You can't be Jewish. You don't have horns." I said, "What?" And she said, "I was told that all Jews have horns." I said, "No. I'm a Jew. I don't have horns. Nobody I know has horns."

That was - you know, it was like - there were about four black kids, and they all came from literally the other side of the tracks. And it was an area where I think they had been servants for the fancier areas, like Haverford and Bryn Mawr, because the Main Line was right along there, the other side of - and they were - they didn't seem to be able to learn. They just didn't know how to think. I remember one girl was easy. You know, in sixth grade there were rumors about what she did with the boys and was like, really, oh. [Laughs.]

And one of them - this was - you know, there was this woman, Irene, very wiry black girl in sixth grade, in one of my classes sends me a note, and it says, "Meet me after school. I want to fight with you." And I was practically peeing in my pants, because I wasn't a fighter, and she was tough. I could see. So of course, I went, and she said to me, "Louise, I don't want to fight you. They made me do this." And we didn't fight. And I was so relieved.

But, you know, I didn't do well. I remember being so mortified.

[END CD 1.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richard interviewing Louise Fishman on December 21, 2009, at 526 West 27th [Street], New York, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc two.

Louise, we were talking about the new school and the experience there.

MS. FISHMAN: So what I was going to say is that during that time that I was in grade school, my mother just started painting again. You know, she had stopped painting. I didn't even know she was an artist.

MS. RICHARDS: Her paintings weren't in the house or your aunt's?

MS. FISHMAN: Well, not then, but she got to a point where the responsibilities of taking care of us let up, so she was able to start doing her art again. And she worked in the bedroom, in her bedroom, and various places in the house.

And she had me and my brother pose for her. And I have, actually, a painting that she did of me, which I didn't think looked like me, but it doesn't make any difference. But I hated posing, because it meant sitting still for long periods of time, and for a little kid it was hard. But I did. I posed for her.

And then, in the summer I also - a couple of times - I don't know if it happened twice or maybe more - I was taken to my aunt's place. She and her husband rented a little house by the shore, where she painted all summer, and he worked in the rag business. He was a writer who - he didn't write that much. But anyway, he had his father's rag business with his brother in Philadelphia, and he would drive down for the weekend.

So I don't remember the time before, but this one time she had rented a place in Margate, which is one of the little outlying beach towns south of Atlantic City. And during the time I was there, she put a peasant outfit on

me, put beads around my neck. I don't know if she did something with my hair or my face.

And I had to pose for her every day. And it was so boring. And so the two of them were painting my picture. I did not like it, but I didn't question it. I did whatever everybody told me I was supposed to do, which is a little distressing in a way. I'm sure I asked for certain things or said certain things, but I hardly spoke to my aunt.

MS. RICHARDS: This is before you were a teenager?

MS. FISHMAN: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I was maybe nine when my aunt painted me. I'm not sure exactly, but it's around then, and I was definitely not in junior high school yet.

And my aunt, I remember she had an apartment in Philadelphia, downtown. She was part of the bohemian, literati community, you know, the artists. And they actually had little soirees, and she had an apartment where she and her husband - and the place always threw me as a kid- they had beautiful rugs on the floors, like all kinds of rugs. She had art books all over the house. She had her painting all over. They had folk music, you know, records, all kinds of music, and she dressed very outlandishly. She made a lot of her own clothing.

It was totally - they had no children. They were just total eccentrics. And she had two Siamese cats, and I was slightly frightened of them because they were so peculiar looking and they made weird sounds.

The whole thing - she had Fiesta ware. [Laughs.] I remember - because she gave me her Fiesta ware at one point. It was a long time ago, when I was finally moved away from home, and she said, "Would you like - I have extra." So it's no longer in existence, unfortunately. She was very important to me in a lot of ways, but she - I was a little terrified of her.

But it also - I didn't have a place at all. I mean, I knew a different kind of lifestyle. They were very well educated.

He went to Penn [University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia]. She never got through high school, but she was a founding member of Artists Equity Association [Philadelphia/Tri State area]. She was a communist. She was in the WPA [Work Projects Administration]. She studied with Siqueiros when he was in New York. She taught at the Y [YMHA, Young Men's Hebrew Association] in Philadelphia. She gave a series of lectures on contemporary art, modern art, and she - you know, talking about - must have been in the '40s, talking about [Henri] Matisse and [Pablo] Picasso and stuff that not too many people knew about in Philadelphia. She wore pants. She was the first woman in Philadelphia to wear pants. She was written about. She had shows. She was a known - not exactly a celebrity, but a known person.

MS. RICHARDS: And what was her name?

MS. FISHMAN: Razel Kapustin. Her husband's name -

MS. RICHARDS: R-A-Z-E-L?

MS. FISHMAN: R-A-Z-E-L.

MS. RICHARDS: And the last name?

MS. FISHMAN: Kapustin, K-A-P-U-S-T-I-N. She had married - she had eloped originally, and her - with an Italian boy. And her mother insisted that they have it annulled. Her mother was really tough, my grandmother. And she had to leave this guy, which I think - I think she really loved him. Anyway, she married Harry, who she adored. He was, like, very smart and very mean, actually.

MS. RICHARDS: Mean?

MS. FISHMAN: Mean person. I discovered - he was an eccentric. They were in a group of artists and intellectuals who had many soirees, and he would address the group. He'd talk about Yiddish humor. He talked about poetry. You know, he was kind of a smart guy, really smart guy. And she thought the world of him.

And she was completely self-educated, and when she drank, which she did by herself and around others, she - I knew she was drunk because she had put on an English accent and pronounce things the "English" way. You know, when words - like [Albert] "Camus" instead of "Camu." It was like - [laughs].

When I was in art school, I would go to visit her because she was an artist. I wanted to learn. It's very painful, actually, this business about her. And I've become extremely vulnerable since my father's death.

But my aunt - she told me this a long, long time ago, that she was a writer. She didn't start out as a painter. And he was a writer. And they both submitted work to the -

MS. RICHARDS: You mean Harry.

MS. FISHMAN: Harry. They both submitted work to the Yale Review, and she was at home all day. She cooked. She cleaned. She was a great cook. She did everything. Had beautiful colors, and everything was gorgeous in their house.

And she said to me - one day the mail came. "My story was accepted, and his was rejected, and I wrote to them, and I told them to send my story back. And I never told him, and I never wrote again. And that's when I started to paint."

And he never went to her openings, because he was so jealous and angry. She kept - you know, no matter what she did, she would have been good. She was talented, extremely talented, smart, interesting, good looking.

You know, there was a photographer in the group who took extraordinary photographs of her. Most of them disappeared. I have two. She was important, and he hated it. And she never understood that he hated her.

I think that's - and in fact, she had a lot of friends, and he slowly got rid of all her friends. I remember one time - my mother told me this - that they had invited some friends over. They used to have a lot of things at their house. And Harry put a sign on the door addressed to these people that were friends of hers: "You are no longer invited, ever." And they didn't know that it was Harry. They assumed it was Razel, so she lost all her friends.

So she was isolated, and she had a history of mental illness. She actually - before she was married, I was told from my mother that she had had a lot of shock treatment. She had a nervous breakdown and shock treatment. And so she was pretty fragile, and she starved herself to death.

I think there were things wrong - it's never been clear, and I ended up with the biggest responsibility there for her. I was living in New York [City], but I was visiting my parents when it happened. And it was one of the worst things I've ever been through in my life.

MS. RICHARDS: Her husband had already died?

MS. FISHMAN: No. He was very much alive. He would -

MS. RICHARDS: And he allowed her to starve herself to death?

MS. FISHMAN: You know, I used to visit her regularly. When I moved to New York, I didn't visit her as much. And it was troubling to me. She was troubling. She just lectured to me. And you know, and what she said was interesting, always about art and her take on things. She didn't believe in abstraction.

MS. RICHARDS: Even though she lectured in Philadelphia about Picasso and Matisse?

MS. FISHMAN: They were all - it was subject matter. And she said, "[Jackson] Pollock - you know, Siqueiros used enamel way before Pollock, and I think that's where he learned how to use enamel." It was Siqueiros, actually, because they were probably in the same class. But she would go on and on about the pointless aspects of abstraction. And of course, I kept my mouth shut, because I was very interested in it. That's what I was interested in.

MS. RICHARDS: Going back to your schooling, what about high school and your experience in high school, academically, artistically, after-school activities?

MS. FISHMAN: No. The first couple of years I didn't - I probably had art, but I didn't do much. I was an athlete, and one of the things that was really troubling to me is I used to pitch for a boys' baseball team, and then when we got to junior high school, they were all - they were eligible to join a team, and there were no teams for girls. And I went out for a hockey team, and I didn't like hockey very much.

And then I tried out for basketball trial. I'd never played basketball, but I got on the team. And I played basketball for four years, and every day after school I played basketball. And that's what I loved.

And school - you know, I had headaches every day all through my childhood until I was about 14, when my parents finally took me to a child psychiatrist, child psychologist I guess, at my aunt's urging. First she told them that they had to get me, to have me observed in the hospital. And they put me in a hospital for a week and did observation - you know, they did all kinds of tests, and they found nothing wrong.

And then my aunt said, "Well, now you're going to have to" - and that was in the '50s. Nobody was going to a therapist unless they were crazy. And so my parents did it because I had headaches all the time, and it was horrible.

I mean, in my days where I'd go to school, hated school, I'd start getting a headache around 11 a.m. or 12, like around lunch or before lunch. And then it would get worse and worse, and I - but somehow I don't remember having headaches playing basketball, but anyway. I'd go home with this headache, and I'd lie down, and we'd have dinner, and then I would lie down and usually throw up and go to bed. That's what I remember mainly about these headaches. I don't know it was every day, but it was pretty regular. It was a routine. I was a very - I had a lot of trouble as a kid.

And when I was in this little therapy thing, I didn't know what it was about. I didn't understand it, but I got rid of my headaches. You know, he gave me some insight into the fact that my mother wasn't allowing me to do anything on my own, and then I had to - for instance, one of the first things he said to me is, "You have to get on the bus and the subway and come here by yourself." And I was terrified. I was 14. I was terrified. My mother had taken me everywhere. And I learned how to do it. I still - when I'm getting on a bus, I have to make sure I have my metro card. [Laughs.] It's funny how those things just never go away completely.

But it's interesting because I'm very independent, and I always was in a certain way but - and somehow that little bit - and I remember also telling him how disappointed I was that my mother never told me what to do. She never disciplined me. And he said, "Well, why don't you just tell her?" So I said, "Mom, tell me that I should be playing the piano. I want you to tell me to do my homework." And she said, "Okay. Play the piano." But she never did it again. She didn't take it very seriously.

And the therapy ended after this first three- or four-month period. I didn't know what happened. That was the end of it. And when I later went into therapy, they got all my records, and it turned out that my - they approached my mother, and they said, "We'd like to continue seeing Louise, because if she doesn't have therapy, she's going to be in a lot of trouble later in her life. But we won't continue it unless you agree to see a therapist." And she said, absolutely not.

MS. RICHARDS: Unless your mother agreed to see -

MS. FISHMAN: With them, you know, in that same institution.

MS. RICHARDS: That was perceptive of them.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes. "Absolutely not." She said there's nothing wrong with me, and that was the end of it. I never heard about it again.

MS. RICHARDS: But that cured your headaches.

MS. FISHMAN: It did, until I was about 21, and then I started getting them again. I haven't had them in a long time.

MS. RICHARDS: So through high school your focus was on basketball.

MS. FISHMAN: It was on basketball and boys at the time. I mean, I had a boyfriend when I was 14 that I went with until I was - through high school. I mean, I'll tell you. I had this boyfriend, and he was nice looking. He had some money. He took me out to - you know, we went to the movies and we had cheese-steaks [submarine sandwiches] afterwards, and it was, you know, the girls were impressed.

But when I was about that age, I had visited a friend in Atlantic City. I was spending, like ,the weekend with her. Her parents had a place in Ocean - in Atlantic City someplace. And we went to the movies - I've told the story a million times because it's a crucial story. We saw Don't Bother to Knock [1952] with Marilyn Monroe and Richard Widmark. And I was mesmerized by Marilyn Monroe. And we went out - we always went out and had some food afterwards, and then we went back to her apartment. And we were sleeping in the same bedroom, opposite beds, and I couldn't sleep.

I kept thinking about her. And I said to my friend, "What did you think about that actress?" And she said, "Oh, I don't know; I guess she was good." I said, "I can't stop thinking about her. Maybe that's what makes a real great actress." And she didn't say anything. And I couldn't get her out of my mind. And then one night I had a dream where she asked me to kiss her, and I woke up and I thought, oh, I'm a lesbian. Oh, no.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you even have the language for that? Did you understand - you understood that.

MS. FISHMAN: Oh, yes. Kids were joking about that when I was in grade school. You know, if you wore - what was it - green on Thursdays or some dopey thing where if you wore a pinkie ring - I mean - you know. And there was no context at all. I knew nothing about it. I just knew that it was wrong, and I kept it to myself.

And not only did I keep it to myself, but I wouldn't go to see her movies because I was afraid of the expression on my face, and people would be able to read my feelings. And I only wanted to go to her movies. I mean, I did

eventually again, but I remember not even being able to walk by the photographs that they used to have outside the movies.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you feel like that it was a crush? Did you think of it that way?

MS. FISHMAN: Oh, well, I - it was - I didn't even think of the word. It was just bad. It was sexual, and it was bad. And I had no idea, and I never mentioned it to anybody. And then I - when I was on the basketball team, I developed a crush on the coach, which every lesbian in the world has done. And I think she probably was a lesbian, actually, in retrospect.

But there was another girl on the team - and I loved all the girls in the teams, the older ones because they were the great players, and I just had crushes on all of them. And I was very good at this sport.

And this friend of mine who was my age - because there weren't that many people who got on the team who were that generation, that year, said to me, "I have a crush on Ms. Reese." And I said, "Oh, I do, too." She had the language. And she said, "I think we should go talk to Ms." - I forget her name, the hygiene teacher who was very close to the women in the school. She was very comforting, and girls went to her when they became pregnant or whatever.

So I said, "I don't know about that." I thought, that is the doper idea. I would never admit that to anybody. And she said, "Oh, yes. She'll understand, and she'll tell us what to do."

So we went to this woman's office, and this friend of mine, Miss Naïve, says, "We have a crush on Ms. Reese." And this woman says, "Well, girls, you're a little old for that." And I thought, I knew it. I knew it. [Laughs.] And she - and that was it. There was - and we walked out. And she said - but we didn't learn anything, or she didn't help us or something. And I thought, oh, you're so dumb. You don't know these things.

But the reason I brought it up at that moment about when I was talking about this boyfriend is I knew that there was more passion in my life, that that incident taught me that there was more. There had to be more. If I was feeling that, then, there was more, and that this wasn't good enough.

And so at the end - he wanted me to become engaged or something like that when he went to college, and I said, no, that's not - and it wasn't like I was looking for a girl or anything. I just knew there was something else, something other. So that's that story.

My experience in my studies - I flunked algebra. I didn't actually flunk it, but the teacher flunked me because she didn't think I was doing up to par with what I could have done. I really was not a good math student, and I couldn't understand - my father decided to tutor me in this algebra. And it was worse, and I got really confused. And it was the only course I ever failed, and I was mortified. And they wouldn't let me take the academic program anymore.

So after ninth grade - and my parents were not savvy enough to say, "Well, you go to summer school and make it up." So I never made it up. And I went to the next grade not being able to - the last science class I had was biology, so I couldn't take chemistry or physics. I couldn't take geometry or trigonometry.

And they put me into the general English. I mean, it was a good English class, actually. It was a good teacher, but I didn't get the fancy teacher, and I didn't get the fancy history. And I had courses like radio production and drama. And I had history and English and Spanish, health and gym, you know, were the things that were - home ec, but I was not on the course for college.

And my father insisted that I take typing. He wanted me to take shorthand, and I refused. I'm not going to do that. I was like a little butch. You know, I wasn't - I always thought of - you know, I never liked the idea of doing any of the things or looking like these girls that were so - not very strong looking and weren't capable, and I just didn't want to do it.

And being a secretary - I mean, that's what my father wanted me to do because my father didn't expect that I would be smart. I don't think he thought he was smart. I mean, I think that there was a lack of confidence. And probably - and my mother had no idea. So she wasn't very helpful, although she studied French on her own, read [Marcel] Proust in French. I mean, my mother learned things on her own. She picked things up like my aunt, but not as sophisticated.

MS. RICHARDS: So you started thinking about art school on your own, or did someone -

MS. FISHMAN: No. I didn't think about art school. I had art, and I was good at it. People told me I was good. And I did this - the teacher let me do an oil painting. I was the only kid in the class who could do an oil painting, and he said, "You can take it home if you want to finish it."

And I'd done this painting of a girl reading a book that I had started. And I took it home to work on it, and I said to my mother, "I can't - I don't know how to paint the hands. Can you teach me how to paint the hands?" And she painted the hands and face and finished the painting.

And I was very upset. I didn't say anything to her because I didn't understand what had happened. I just knew that I was mortified that I couldn't do it myself, that I was bringing in a painting that wasn't mine.

And of course, it got a prize, and they put it in the hallway. And I was never able to say, you know, my mother did that. I was too embarrassed. And it never occurred to me to be an artist, because neither one of my relatives, my mother nor my aunt, presented me with any kind of a life. That life of my aunt's was crazy to me.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were growing up, through your schooling, through high school, did you go to the Philadelphia museums?

MS. FISHMAN: No. I think maybe my mother took me. My mother - what happened is that my mother was taking classes in Philadelphia. She went to the Print Club and to the printmaking classes and drawing classes.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, so not just French.

MS. FISHMAN: Oh, yes- no. She was painting. She went to my aunt's class. She went to the Barnes Foundation. My aunt had also gone to Barnes and studied with Albert Barnes, actually. My mother knew a lot about art, and she had ARTnews that came regularly, and she belonged to the [Philadelphia] Museum of Art. And so I was privy to the magazines, which I read in the bathroom. I didn't read them. I looked at the pictures and read some of them, I guess, some of the articles. And I looked at the art books.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, from that, did you have a sense of what being an artist meant? You said you had no examples of that life, but did you feel like you could get examples possibly from the magazine or from your experiences in the museum?

MS. FISHMAN: No. I'm not sure - I think that some of these articles I read before I was out of high school, so-and-so "Paints a Picture" [series of articles in ARTnews]. And that was fascinating to me, to see this solitary man, usually in his studio smoking a cigarette, or, you know.

And I knew all of them. I mean, I learned who they were. And there was Joan Mitchell one day, and I think that may have been after I was in art school. I'm not sure. But I remember thinking, a woman, and she looks strong. Wow. I'm not sure this was when I was in high school.

My father said, "If you want to go to college, you can go to Temple University [Philadelphia, PA]." And the only thing I qualified for was elementary education because I didn't have academic - any programs to qualify. So I was signed up for elementary education. I had no interest in teaching or children. And I went away in the summer. At the end of the summer, the women who were on the - I was on the tennis team, too, and I had never played tennis before. I wasn't a very good tennis player but -

MS. RICHARDS: The high school tennis team?

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah. I probably could have been good if I'd learned. The girls that were on the sports teams had their own sorority. None of them were Jewish. And they invited me to be in their sorority because I was friends with them.

So I joined the sorority. I remember that they had to change their constitution, which said, "good Christian girls," to get me in. And so I was in their little sorority, and the only thing I remember is that we - after we graduated, they rented a place in Ocean City, New Jersey, which is where the non-Jews went. Anyway, we never went to - the Jews went to Atlantic City, and the non-Jews went to Ocean City and some other places.

So we went there, and I had a wonderful time with these women. I loved them. They were a little more - a lot of them were very smart. They were all going to college, and they were good athletes, and it was all part of the thing. You know, they were much more acceptable.

And one day we were on the beach, and this young man came along, very nice-looking guy, covered with freckles. I think he might have had red hair, and he was wearing Bermuda shorts, these long socks, desert boots, and he was carrying a leather satchel.

And he came over, and he said, "Do you mind if I sit down?" And I said, "No, go ahead." I was so curious about him. We talked a little bit, and I said, "These are interesting clothes." He said, "Yeah, well, where I go to school, they wear them there." I said, "Really? Where do you go to school?" He said, "The Museum School of Art in Philadelphia." I said, "Really?" I said, "What's it like?" And he said, "Oh, it's great. It's a terrific school. They have great faculty, and the students are great." I said, "Does everybody wear these clothes?" He said - [laughs]. This

is an absolutely 100-percent true story. And he said, "Yeah." And I said, "What about the girls? Do girls wear desert boots?" He said, "Yes, everybody dresses like this."

I said, "Well, can I get in? How do I get in?" And he said, "Well," he said, "Did you have art in high school?" I said, yes. He said, "Well if you have work that you've done that you like, put it in a little [port]folio of some sort, call up the dean - here's his number - and make an appointment to see him."

So I did that. I didn't tell my parents. It didn't even occur to me to tell them. I don't know why. But I gathered some stuff together, put it in a folio, called the dean, spoke to the dean, and he said, "Well, come in. Can you come in tomorrow?" I said, sure. It was like the end of August. I was supposed to start Temple like in two weeks or a week.

And I went in, and I spoke to him, and he looked at my portfolio, and he said, "Oh, you're very talented." He said to me, "Now, what do you read, dear?" And I said - and I had just been reading Russian novels because I was sort of curious about anything Russia. And I told him the names of the books, and he said, "Very good, dear." He said, "Okay. You're in." And he said, you know, "Give me your address and your phone number, and we'll send you all the information you need so that you can register."

And that was it. And I went home, and I said, "I'm going to art school." And they were both stunned. I thought my mother would be thrilled, because she had taken me into town with her - she was always talking about how wonderful it was that she went to the coffeehouses where the folk singers were playing - and she went to these classes and how exciting and how interesting the people were, and then she took me to a coffeehouse.

She also took me to the Print Club, where there was a drawing class, just to be with her, because she would drive in at night. And the teacher said, "Would you like to draw?" And I said, "All right." So they gave me an easel and a pad of paper, and somebody gave me a pencil, a charcoal. I don't remember what it was. And there was a nude model. There was a guy posing, and I started drawing. And it looked like a figure.

And people came up, and they said, "Have you drawn before?" And I said, no. And I finished the drawing, and everybody was like, "Oh, you're very good." And my mother was, like, very jealous. And I didn't get it completely until much later, but she really didn't like it. And I was really good at it, and I thought, oh, I'm good at this.

So that was about it in terms of my being in a situation where it's like - you know, I took an art class with my Aunt Razel, but I didn't like it. I didn't like doing that stuff. I don't remember what we did, but I did not like it. And I don't know what else I did outside of school, but I really wasn't interested.

And when I told my mother, we had to get my outfit together - I had a pair of brown Bermuda shorts, tan knee socks, desert boots; I bought a leather bag - to this day I can remember it was leather and suede - and I went to school and -

MS. RICHARDS: This is the Philadelphia College of Art.

MS. FISHMAN: It was called the Philadelphia Museum School of Art at the time. It was part of the Philadelphia Museum, and then it became - then it connected with Penn, I think, so that I could get a degree, actually. I think it was connected with Penn, so we had regular academic courses. It had been just a trade school before that. And I don't think they were connected to the museum anymore, but initially they were.

And I had my clothes, and I got all my - and I loved all the tools, because we had sculpture and ceramics and woodworking and soldering. We did metal sculptures. We did all kinds of drawing, painting.

MS. RICHARDS: Did your parents pay for your expenses?

MS. FISHMAN: They paid for - yes. Oh, I had to work. I had to work three nights a week and Saturdays.

MS. RICHARDS: At school?

MS. FISHMAN: No. In Gimbels [department store] or - I had different jobs. So I was working all the time, and I had a lot of homework because I had drawing and -

MS. RICHARDS: Were you living at home?

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah, I was commuting. And it was not an easy - it was like an hour. It wasn't as bad as it was when I went to Tyler [School of Art, Temple University]. That was like closer to two hours, and I was working. It was not easy but I loved it. And I didn't know how it was going to take, you know, being in a school. It was basically a commercial art school, the first year of which you did everything, and then the second year, you specialized. And the people who were interested in painting took advertising, for some reason. That's the course that they took. That's the program they followed, but they had good teachers, and I guess Kline had taught

there.

MS. RICHARDS: Franz Kline.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes. Not when I was a student there, but he had been there before. And they had - I know at least one man who had been, I think - was in the Bauhaus [school], came from Germany, I think. He came over after the war or maybe - you know, whenever, but his teaching was Bauhaus, color and design class. And then I had - the first week, I had my first painting class. The minute I started painting, I felt, this is what I want to do. It was like -

MS. RICHARDS: Did you find out that everyone was, in fact, wearing what you were wearing?

MS. FISHMAN: Nobody was. It's like very few people were wearing - the women definitely didn't, but it was okay, because I had my outfit. It was really - I loved it. I loved going to school there. I loved it. But I had to work very hard. There was -

MS. RICHARDS: Sounds like it.

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah, really was. Long days of classes and lots of homework.

MS. RICHARDS: And the commute and the -

MS. FISHMAN: And working.

MS. RICHARDS: Working.

MS. FISHMAN: And I probably would have stayed through four years, but in January of that first year at school, a woman approached me, who was on faculty, and ended up seducing me. And I was delighted about it because I felt like, everything's coming together.

I remember riding this - there was a train - it was the elevated train, but it went underground at a certain point, but above ground what I was learning how to do is see and think and hear. And I remember being so excited on the train, looking out the window at the buildings and the lines and the telephone poles and everything, the people, everything; I thought, this is so thrilling.

It's like - you know, I learned I had a voice. I had a passion. And then I had a passion. [Laughs.] It wasn't for her so much. It was really the whole idea that this is who I am. But my mother found out. It's a long story. And my parents found out. My mother found out. And my mother basically wouldn't let me out of the house.

MS. RICHARDS: You were there for two years or for one year?

MS. FISHMAN: One year.

MS. RICHARDS: One year.

MS. FISHMAN: And they wouldn't let me go back a second year. And my mother wouldn't let me see this woman or talk to her on the phone. She monitored every phone call I got. I got a job. My mother came with me, drove me to work, picked me up. My mother had said to me, "I haven't been" -

MS. RICHARDS: What kind of job?

MS. FISHMAN: I was selling ladies' dresses at a place called Dewees.

MS. RICHARDS: Dewees?

MS. FISHMAN: D-E-W-E-E-S. I was showing these, like, housedresses to middle-aged ladies. I had no idea. It was -

MS. RICHARDS: It never occurred to you to just leave home.

MS. FISHMAN: I didn't feel like I had a - I don't think I had much confidence. I didn't think I could support myself. At that point what I was making - you know, I wasn't doing full-time work. I don't think I had a sense of independence to do that at that point.

And I was - I felt humiliated, because suddenly my sexuality was out there, and it was terribly painful. I mean, in those days, first of all, being queer was not a picnic. And it was embarrassing to have anybody know it. And it was embarrassing for me to be sexual and having anybody know it.

So I was - I actually took a bottle of aspirins. And I was in the bedroom. My mother was kind of - not locking me

in the bedroom, but basically I was in my bedroom. And this was during the summer of '57, and I took a bottle of aspirins. I thought, I don't want to live anymore. It was too painful. And she was, like, controlling my life, which was the worst thing I had ever experienced. But what happened is I was sitting down on the side of my bed, and the room started going - spinning - and I thought, oh, I don't want to kill myself.

MS. RICHARDS: This is after you had the bottle of aspirins.

MS. FISHMAN: After I had the bottle. Oh, my God. I had no idea. I thought it was just like, you know, like you just go to sleep and die. No. The room was spinning violently, and it was unbearable. And so I went into the bathroom, and I drank like 12 glasses of water and threw it up - threw up as much as I could. I never told anybody, so I didn't go to the hospital. I think I might have damaged my kidneys or my liver or something doing that, just because of later stuff, but it was a pretty bad time.

And I thought my mother would send me to a therapist. And she said, "I'll take care of this." She said, "I haven't been a mother to you. Now I'm going to be a mother." And I thought, she hasn't been a mother? What has she been? You know, I don't know what she thought.

My mother was not really - neither of my parents were old enough to have children in any way. They were babies. They were 21, but they were babies. They were in an age that was considered mature then, but they really - they didn't have a clue. My mother had no clue.

MS. RICHARDS: So she wasn't even 40, or barely 40, when this was happening.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: So how did you escape and go to the Pennsylvania Academy?

MS. FISHMAN: Well, what happened is I - two things happened. I fooled my parents. I signed up at Temple, but I went to Tyler, which is part of Temple University. They didn't even know I was on a separate campus. And they found out, but it was okay because it wasn't the museum school.

MS. RICHARDS: This is before you went to the Pennsylvania Academy?

MS. FISHMAN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MS. FISHMAN: I went to Tyler for a year. And I also took myself to a clinic to get psychiatric help, which wasn't very good. It was kind of even more mortifying. I mean, the interviews and the - it was very anti - it was very homophobic, the whole - it was - I was diagnosed with a character disorder, or was it a personality disorder? One time it was a character disorder; another time it was a personality disorder.

And the guy who I had as my psychiatrist was an army psychiatrist, had been in the army. And his advice was that all I needed to do to fix it was to sleep with men, and then I'd be fine.

So I did that. I hated it. I didn't want to do it. I did it. And up until a certain point, I thought, this is crazy. It was unpleasant. It was humiliating. I didn't have some basic sense of myself that I could fight. I was a fighter, but in certain areas - and I think sexuality was one of them - I was really a goner. I think I might have been abused. That's what keeps coming up, but I don't know. I have a suspicion about a particular thing, because there were too many things that have signs that I know, that I can see. Anyway. So it took me awhile.

And it was one of those clinics where you had a therapist for a certain amount of time, and then they - was a school or something - then you got another one and another one. I finally got a good one, still trying to straighten me out, you know, arguing with me about my sexuality, but at least I was learning about myself. The other guys taught me nothing.

And I was painting in the basement, and I fell in love with sculpture at Tyler, which was a big deal there at the time.

MS. RICHARDS: Painting in the basement of the school?

MS. FISHMAN: My parents' house.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, your home.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes, because I had to work, and it was a two-hour commute. I had to travel - a little trolley to the subway, that subway, another subway and a bus, and carrying my supplies.

And I was working three nights and Saturdays. And I don't know how I did it. I, like, had mono. I got mono. I was sick for five weeks in bed. They told me not to get out of bed. But I really wanted to be a sculptor. But there was no way, because I had to leave school to go to work. I couldn't work in the shop after school. I couldn't do it at home, so I just painted. But I became so excited about working with clay from a model, and the idea - you know, wood carving and stone carving, and they started to introduce welding.

They were more traditional then, so it was more like figurative styles, but it varied a bit. I had a very interesting education there for a year, learned Flemish [Belgian-Dutch] under-painting techniques, and we made our own paint. I didn't go on after that year, but if I had - of course, the school changed. The dean left, and they had another dean. The whole thing changed. It became just like a regular art school.

But they had taught fresco, and they taught lost-wax casts. I mean, they had [Auguste] Rodin's enlarging machine, because the dean had been an apprentice to Rodin and he brought that over. And the sculpture teacher apprenticed to Rodin. And the painters were - you know, they were all from Europe.

There were two teachers of consequence at Tyler - one was Herman Gundersheimer, who was an art historian, and I learned an enormous amount from him.

MS. RICHARDS: Sorry. His last name again?

MS. FISHMAN: Gundersheimer, G-U-N-D-E-R-S-H-E-I-M-E-R. He was a fabulous art history teacher. And it turned out that he had been the director of the Jewish Museum in Berlin before the war. And I didn't know about that. Much of the faculty came from Europe. And he was an extraordinary scholar. When I had a show at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts [Philadelphia], I had become friendly with Emily Bilsky, who was a curator at the Jewish Museum [New York, NY].

MS. RICHARDS: Bilsky.

MS. FISHMAN: B-I-L-S-K-Y. Y, is it? I think so.

MS. RICHARDS: You said there were two important teachers there, besides Herman Gundersheimer.

MS. FISHMAN: There was Rudy Staffel, S-T-A-F-F-E-L. He was the ceramics teacher. And he - I used to bring my painting to him in this green house, which was the ceramics studio, because he was so smart and had so much dignity, and he was someone I respected. And he gave me very good advice. I said, "I have no teachers here."

He said, "Matisse is your teacher" - because I had been doing things on my own. I mean, was doing most of my painting at home. In fact, the faculty allowed me to work at home after a certain point. This is, like, when I went back to Tyler, actually, because I left Tyler after a year.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Why did you leave after a year?

MS. FISHMAN: I didn't really like Tyler. When I went to Tyler, it was an academy. I mean, this is before I was doing a lot of painting and before I had that talk with Rudy Staffel. I saw it as - you know, I was interested in Abstract Expressionism. I really was.

MS. RICHARDS: And how did you learn about that?

MS. FISHMAN: Through my mother's art magazines, and then at the museum school, because Kline had been there. And there was - Louis Finkelstein was [a] teacher there. I didn't study with him, but they had a panel discussion. They had a very interesting program in a lot of ways, but there was a panel discussion, and the panel was unbelievable. It was a small school at the time. Marcel Duchamp, Philip Guston, [Theodoros] Stamos, Louise Nevelson, and, I think, someone from the school.

And I was transfixed and transformed by this panel. I couldn't believe it. And I had seen, you know, "Philip Guston Paints a Picture" [in the ARTnews series], so I knew him and his work, and, of course, I knew the others. And I watched Guston. He had this cigarette, this really long ash on his cigarette. It was so elegant.

And he said something that I never forgot. I didn't understand it, but I never forgot it. And I understand it now, of course. But he said - they asked him about his process, and he said, "Well," he said, "My task in the studio is to paint everyone out of the studio." And he said, "And then my task is to paint myself out of my studio." And I thought -

[END CD 2.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Louise Fishman on December 21, 2009, in Chelsea, New York, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc three.

MS. FISHMAN: So I was talking about this panel with Philip Guston. And, you know, I was really serious. I mean, I had been painting for less than a year when that panel took place, but I'd been looking at the "Artist Paints a Picture." I'd been looking at art books. I mean, my mother went to Barnes. I was looking at the books on [Paul] Cezanne and Matisse. My mother was telling me things that she learned at Barnes.

And I was beginning to think, especially since this woman who seduced me gave me the impression that there were a lot of artists who were queer, and it was, you know, everybody's queer. All artists are queer. Michelangelo [di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni] was queer. This one's queer. And I thought, yes. And I remember I was reading the Communist Manifesto and feeling like a communist, yeah, ha-ha, and a queer communist artist, and I had a place, and I was special. This was very special.

And so I was very serious. I knew what I wanted. I wanted to be a painter. It never occurred to me how I was going to make a living, never. I never thought about it once. I knew I would have to. So I don't know what I was thinking. But I was very serious, and my other teachers at the museum - my teachers, Karl Sherman.

MS. RICHARDS: Sherman.

MS. FISHMAN: S-H-E-R-M-A-N. He was the color design person, and I learned more from him than from many of the teachers because of his passion about - this is - I'm sure he came from the Bauhaus. I know he came from Germany.

He talked about color and space and line and shape. And we had these dopey projects, but he was very disciplined - and they had to be done properly, you know, color wheels and gray scales and all that stuff - but he talked about Cezanne and [Piet] Mondrian with such - like, I wouldn't have looked at either one of them at that point in my life. I was interested in Franz Kline and [Willem] de Kooning and [Joan] Mitchell, you know, those people.

But he conveyed such passion about these two artists and about the dynamic in their painting that I just was captivated, and I just spent a lot of time looking at The Card Players [Cezanne, 1890-92] over and over and over again.

And I don't remember when I went to Barnes. They opened it to the public at some point. I finally did get to go in, but I hadn't gone there to study. My mother had gone. I'd seen the photographs in the book and - you know, the black-and-white photographs. And there was a lot of Cezanne in the Philadelphia Museum [of Art] and Mondrian. The [Louise and Walter] Arensberg Collection [in the Philadelphia Museum of Art] was fabulous.

And that was - and I was in the museum all the time that first year. I was downtown. I was there. I worked on Saturdays, and then Sundays I was at the museum. There were nights when the museums were opened. Actually, I don't think so. And I went to - when I wasn't working, I went to draw at this academy downtown, [Samuel S.] Fleisher Art Memorial.

MS. RICHARDS: Fleisher?

MS. FISHMAN: They had models, and they had a sculpture department where you could work with this water-based clay and do a - work on a figure for the night and then just tear it down. And I loved it. You know, I was drawing and doing sculpture. I was drawing in the subway. I was drawing -- everywhere I went, I had a sketchbook open. It was a passion. Every minute - I used every minute. It should only be like that now. [Laughs.]

Tyler was different, but I still kept drawing, and I was working very academically, because in the school I had to do this five-week painting, doing the underpainting technique, working with egg emulsion using, like, hand-ground paints. Art history was incredible.

MS. RICHARDS: This is when you were at Tyler the second time.

MS. FISHMAN: No. The first time.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, the first time.

MS. FISHMAN: The second time, Gundersheimer was there, but a lot of the other faculty weren't. I mean, they were, but they weren't as important. A guy from the Midwest came in.

MS. RICHARDS: When you went to Tyler the second time, you basically had two more years to go before you could get your B.F.A. [Bachelor of Fine Arts]?

MS. FISHMAN: Yes. Although I went to the - actually, what happened after the first year at Tyler was I decided to move away from home. And I moved into town. I had a full-time job, a couple of full-time jobs.

MS. RICHARDS: What kind of job was it?

MS. FISHMAN: One job was with - it was with some medical physicians' hospital or something physicians - I can't remember the name of it.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember what year you moved to your own place?

MS. FISHMAN: It was - let's see. Tyler was '57, '58, so it was '59, probably.

MS. RICHARDS: So you were 20.

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah. So I had an apartment, and I was painting, because I thought, what do we need these teachers for? They aren't teaching me anything. And it was true. They were teaching me technique for how to do it but not - I wasn't learning anything about how to make a painting, and I wasn't learning anything about how to be an artist. Nobody taught that.

MS. RICHARDS: Had you developed a group of friends through that school whom you saw when you were out of school?

MS. FISHMAN: I didn't really see anybody out of school that first year because I was -

MS. RICHARDS: And you were working full time.

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah, and traveling. And so I didn't have much of a community. I mean, I did have some friends. I did meet people. Actually, the first woman I met, I was sitting in the drawing studio first day I was in school, and I'm drawing from a still life. And this woman - I feel this hand go up my back, and I turn around, and there's this tall woman with strawberry blonde hair down to her hip. And she says to me, "Is this the drawing studio?" [Laughs.] I thought, oh, God. How could this happen to me? She was Susan Schari, Dore Schari's daughter, you know the - was he a director?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. FISHMAN: I think that is his name. Dore Schari. I don't know. Anyway, Susan Schari. I think she's probably still around. And so there were two lesbians. I met them immediately, she and her girlfriend, Joan, who was an Englishwoman, very nice woman. Joan Bradley. But I wasn't- I didn't really see much of them. And then there were all these other people that, you know, I knew through their work. Then I met -

MS. RICHARDS: So what made you want to go back to school after feeling like there was nothing they could teach you, or they were teaching you?

MS. FISHMAN: Well, I - what happened is I realized that I would end up being a secretary or file clerk for the rest of my life or doing odd jobs like that, and I'd never get anywhere, and I needed a degree. And so I went back to Tyler, and I had to move home because I couldn't afford to pay for the tuition.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, so that was a huge decision.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes. I was able to afford the Pennsylvania Academy for a semester when I was living downtown, because the tuition was so low, and I knew people who were painters there, and it had a school for fine arts. It was no academics of any kind. It was just an academy.

And so I went, because I was told that if I stuck it out until my third year, that I would get a fellowship to Europe, because they had these fellowships, and I knew people who got them. If you were at all serious, you'd end up getting one. There were two: a Kress Fellowship [Samuel H. Kress Foundation, New York, NY] and some other fellowship. And this woman I knew, who I had an affair with later, had one. And she also had been to Barnes.

But I was there for a semester, and I thought, I'm not going to learn anything here, and I can't bear to be here for three years. It was just boring. I mean, I started out having to draw from plaster casts, and I'd done that already. I'm thinking, I don't want to do this again. So I left there, and then that's when I thought, you know, I'm not getting anywhere.

So it was hard. I had to go home. I started working for TV Guide part-time, so that was helpful. I made some money. And my father made me agree that I would just get an education degree, so I had to spend an extra year there. So I was there until '63.

MS. RICHARDS: At Tyler.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: So you graduated with a dual degree in art and education?

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah. And I used it just to - when I first got to New York, I got a couple of teaching jobs in the high school system, or junior high school system, because I needed to pay for psychoanalysis. And so that came in handy, only for that, and I was - and I hated teaching.

MS. RICHARDS: Before we go back to teaching, as soon as you graduated from Tyler, did you -

MS. FISHMAN: I went to graduate school.

MS. RICHARDS: You went to graduate school at the University of Illinois. So you left home. And how did you - did you have a graduate assistantship or a scholarship?

MS. FISHMAN: I had an assistantship. Yes. And I -

MS. RICHARDS: How did you pick that graduate school?

MS. FISHMAN: The guy who taught painting at Tyler, one of these Midwestern guys, he told me to go to graduate school. And I said, "Why would you go to graduate school? I've had enough art school." He said, "Well, you get a degree, and then you can teach." I said, "What do you need a degree now for? A master's degree in art? Why would you bother?" And he said, "No, it's good. You get a studio. You get to work another couple of years, and you can teach in college." And he said, "I'll write recommendations, and here's where you should apply." He never wrote them I found out later. He never sent his recommendations in. The University of Illinois [Urbana-Champaign], University of Indiana, and the University of Wisconsin. He said they have lots of money, a lot of equipment; the teachers are good.

So I got into Illinois. Well, they gave me an assistantship. So I went out there. My assistantship was working in a library painting numbers on library books, Dewey Decimal system. And then I did a little assistant teaching, not much. And I was there for a year, and I thought it was awful.

MS. RICHARDS: But you got your master's there?

MS. FISHMAN: I did.

MS. RICHARDS: That was short, in a year.

MS. FISHMAN: Two years.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, you were there for -

MS. FISHMAN: I was there for a year, and then I left because I couldn't stand it. And I was not good at school. I wasn't - the teachers were horrible. They were really not good.

MS. RICHARDS: So it wasn't your fault that you weren't good at school. It wasn't a good school.

MS. FISHMAN: No. It's not - I was good. I mean, I was - they usually gave me special categories. I mean, I got a lot of prizes at Tyler for my work. There were all these prizes, even money. They gave me a little money. It was very nice. The teachers really respected me. They allowed me to - I could bring my paintings in once a month. Instead of having to paint in the school, I could paint at home and bring my paintings in.

MS. RICHARDS: So what did you do when you left after one year in Champaign?

MS. FISHMAN: I took an apartment, and then I realized the same thing, that I had to get - finish this damned degree. So I went - I applied again. They let me come back. I had to go through the summer. I did it in one semester in the summer.

And my friends - my friends were still there. Some of my friends were still there. I had good friends, and they were interesting. You know, a couple of them, I continue to have a friendship with them afterwards, not - I mean, they're not good friends right now, but they were.

So I was there - I was extraordinarily depressed, drank a lot in graduate school. I was just really depressed. And finally, by the end, I was so depressed that I went to see a social worker in the college, because I couldn't get out of bed in the morning and I was terrified. You know what I was terrified of? That I was going to die alone.

I think my aunt - I didn't tell you about my aunt's death exactly, but that really poisoned the well for me in a big way. And I don't even think she died yet. She didn't die yet. No. She hadn't even died yet. I was already scared to death of being alone, dying alone.

I was alone. I didn't really have many friends then there, and I was profoundly depressed. I think there was depression running in the family. Not my father, but my aunt - and I think I got that, not as heavily as she did, but I definitely have depression.

And so when I graduated, I went directly to New York. I stopped in Philadelphia briefly and just drove my U-Haul right to New York and stayed with a friend for a couple of days and then moved into an apartment on Avenue C.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you think you were going to support yourself as artist?

MS. FISHMAN: I had been to New York once, and I found a job.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, I was going to ask you if that was your first visit to New York.

MS. FISHMAN: No, no. I'd been to New York a lot from Philadelphia, going to look at galleries and museums. I went a lot from Philadelphia. Then not from Illinois, but I came - I came in just to look for a job. And I found a job as a legal proofreader, because I learned proofreading at TV Guide. And then I was working.

MS. RICHARDS: And that was a relatively good-paying job.

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah. Well, it was better than being a file clerk, I guess. I worked on Wall Street, you know, a fancy law firm.

MS. RICHARDS: So you went to New York - I think it's 1965. Where did you live?

MS. FISHMAN: Avenue C and 10th Street. I had a little apartment that I painted in, and I was terrified of the neighborhood; it was so dangerous, and I had no idea. I mean, I grew up in the suburbs in - well, not grew up. I mean -

MS. RICHARDS: Did you feel you had to live in that neighborhood because of the cost?

MS. FISHMAN: Yes. And I didn't know anything about New York. A friend of mine lived on Seventh Street by the park, and she - the one I stayed with, she didn't want me to stay there anymore. I thought she'd let me stay for a couple of weeks until I got settled and figured it out. She said, "No. I can't stand this. You have to leave." She was a drunk also. Artists drink a lot, just terrible drinkers. Fortunately, I got sick from drinking, so I couldn't drink as much as I might have. So I never had that problem.

But I looked at some apartments, and she - I said, "Well, this neighborhood looks pretty bad." She said, "Oh, no, this is a very safe neighborhood. There are police here all the time." And I didn't think it through but -

MS. RICHARDS: Why are police there all the time?

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah. [Laughs.] Because there were murders on the block and drug dealing, and it was very scary.

MS. RICHARDS: So in that apartment, though, while you were working full time on Wall Street proofreading, you were painting.

MS. FISHMAN: I was painting at night and going to see - well, then I - a woman that I met at the proofreading pool became my lover. She was five years younger than I, and she and I used to go to see the Andy Warhol movies and used to go to hear the Velvet Underground, and we did a lot - her family were involved in the arts.

Her father - actually he knew Warhol. He'd also met Picasso and Duchamp. They were Italian. Her father was Italian, and her mother was American but with a French background. She was a translator of French and Italian books. And they were separated. And Angelo Lanza was just an incredible man. And anyway, she was very -

MS. RICHARDS: What's his name? Angelo -

MS. FISHMAN: Angelo Lanza. He told people he was a prince, and she said to me he was only a count. [Laughs.] But they were fallen from grace. The family actually - the name is Lanza di Trabia. It's an island off the coast of Sicily. They're Sicilian. It's a famous Sicilian family. It goes way back to I don't know where, many centuries. And they were the skeletons in the closet, I think. They were - anyway, it was a very interesting family. His brother was Lanza del Vasto, who was a religious leader. He had a religious community in the south of France. He studied with [Mahatma] Gandhi, and he came to our loft, a loft on Cooper Square.

MS. RICHARDS: So you moved from -

MS. FISHMAN: Avenue C. First I moved - she helped me find an apartment. I found an apartment on 71st Street on the East Side. It was a rent-controlled apartment, was cheaper than the one downtown, because the woman

had lived there all her life and died there. And so I had this one-bedroom apartment in the Upper East Side with French doors inside. And I also had room to paint. It was very nice. But then we found a loft. The loft came up through a friend.

MS. RICHARDS: So how long did you live on 71st Street?

MS. FISHMAN: It was probably a year.

MS. RICHARDS: It would be hard to give up a rent-controlled apartment.

MS. FISHMAN: Unbelievable, but, you know, I did it because this loft came up, and I wanted a place, and I wanted a loft to work in.

MS. RICHARDS: And you wanted to be downtown?

MS. FISHMAN: I wanted to be downtown, yes, because - although the galleries were all uptown then, but downtown was where everybody was, and the scene was downtown. You know, things I did, the Cedar Bar, although that was coming to a close. But, yes. So I gave it up. I mean, it was hard, but not that hard, because I had an ambition to be in a space that was more appropriate for painting.

MS. RICHARDS: So when did you move to the loft, and where was it?

MS. FISHMAN: It was on Cooper Square, which is half a block from Cooper Union, on what became the Bowery. Cooper Square was a little like a little triangle.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. It still is.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes. Oh, it's still there. So my building is gone, but that building was just taken down, and something else is there. I haven't been there in a while. But it was really a nice place to work, and the guy downstairs was a painter, and he was gay, and he had all these parties. I wasn't very interested because I didn't think he was a very good painter, but he was one of the early people to die from AIDS [Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome].

But I actually met - I didn't have much of a community in the arts at all. I hardly - only knew a few people from Philadelphia who had come, and they were - and some people from Illinois, you know, the graduate program, who had come to New York. Guy Goodwin was a good friend of mine then. And Gerald Hayes, who I still hear from occasionally. He's retired now. And let's see. Where was I?

MS. RICHARDS: So you were still working downtown and living on Cooper Square.

MS. FISHMAN: Right. Actually, I was no longer working there. I had quit. I quit that job. The woman who ran the proofreading pool was awful. And I quit the job, and then this woman, Bianca, quit her job. I got a job doing proofreading for a pharmaceutical advertising company in midtown. She got a job proofreading at CBS [Columbia Broadcasting System]. And she got involved in more things at CBS. And then I did that for a couple of years, and then I - I don't remember what else I did. I mean, I was always doing these jobs.

And then I had a - I don't remember the timing, but I then decided to work part-time, and I made a little more money. I was working in the mornings or in the afternoons or three days a week, I forget which, for a neurologist who was doing research in memory.

And I don't know why he hired me. I think he liked the fact that I was an artist, because I was supposed to help him evaluate the studies that he did with students, you know, these memory studies. And he tried to explain to me when - he used me as a kind of foil to explain his ideas. And he was working with a guy who was a psychologist, and he taught at New Paltz - and they had computers. You know, the computers were like - it filled the room - and I had to do certain things with computers. [Laughs.] And I had to commute to the Bronx. He was at Einstein Medical Center. And then I decided I needed to go into therapy.

So I had to - that's when I decided to try to get a job teaching. So I applied for the Board of Education as a sub[stitute teacher], and I got a job teaching junior high school, the worst junior high school in the whole city, on the Lower East Side. You know, you'd turn your back and they would throw things at you.

And you know, and I had to - I didn't confront it. I was terrified of being in front of a class. I was terrified of those kids. I didn't know how to talk to them. I never was around kids. But it was the thing about wanting to hide, and I couldn't hide there. And I was in a panic all the time. I had panic attacks in the morning. I hated it so.

And then I - they switched me to another school. I slowly found my ground a little bit. Like one school was Charles Evans Hughes High School. I taught at the Food and Maritime Trades High School. But I had to, like,

invent things, because these schools were like - these kids, they were just getting left back. You know, they were just there for welfare purposes.

And at the Food and Maritime Trades High School, I had this group of students that had a disciplinarian who was in charge of them. They were all older, all boys. And the teacher would - this guy would come in, and he'd say, "This is Ms. Fishman. Do you see this button on the wall over there? If Ms. Fishman has any problems with this class, she's going to push that button. You know what's going to happen when she pushes that button? I think you know. I'm going to come in. And you don't want that to happen, do you?" And then he'd walk out, and then I had my - I was supposed to be teaching art. [Laughs.]

So what I did one day was - and half of them were asleep. I wrote on the blackboard, "Drugs I have taken." And I said, "Okay. I'd like to know what you guys are taking. Come up and write the name of the drug on the blackboard." And they did. And they were totally occupied. I said, "I want to know what's going on here, because you are really out of it, all of you." And then there was a guy in the back, and they said, "Don't bother with him. He's a wino." And so I don't know if I ever taught them anything, but at least they were engaged that I was curious about what they were doing with drugs. That's all.

And then at Charles Evans Hughes, most of the students were out in the halls, wandering in the halls, looking in the doorways to see what's going on, and you couldn't get their attention.

Well, I got the first - I think it was the first book on African-American literature that was published. Probably wasn't called that. It was probably called Negro literature. I can't remember exactly.

And I brought the book in, and I read them some stories. And then there was a play, and I said, okay. We're going to perform this little play. So I had these kids come up. And it was about a robbery. And they knew everything about it, and they were just giggling about this and the fact that there was, you know, black literature. And they were coming in from the halls to - because they heard something was going on in there.

You know, I was there for maybe a year. But it was the only thing I accomplished, you know, was to introduce some of those kids to their own literature. And then I taught at High School of Music & Art and, actually, taught there during the strike, the teacher strike, which was -

MS. RICHARDS: What year was that?

MS. FISHMAN: I don't really know.

MS. RICHARDS: Several years after you came to New York, the early '70s?

MS. FISHMAN: Yes. Oh, yes. Definitely. Late '60s. And I, you know, I was brought up in the labor tradition, but I realized after that the parents and the communities and the union and the teachers were completely at odds, and that the communities were running the schools. And that became very interesting to me so I decided to volunteer. And they placed me in [High School of] Music & Art.

First they placed me at this school in Chinatown with little kids who didn't speak English, and I was completely lost. I didn't know any songs to teach them. I didn't know what you did with kids, anyway.

I - actually, participating in helping - students, faculty, and parents decided on the curriculum. That was really a kind of an idealistic, wonderful little period of time. And I enjoyed it a lot. And then the strike was over. And so I don't know where I was, but I got a job at Music & Art. They didn't know, of course, that I taught during the strike. And I taught there for a year, but during that year - oh, this will place it timewise.

During that year was the City College [of New York] student revolution, and my students, my home room students that were all seniors, were very outspoken, and they became radical, radicalized, by this happening across the road, because Music & Art used to be there. And they were the leaders of this strike, student strike at Music & Art. And I ended up supporting them, and I lost my job. [Laughs.]

But I got to know them all, and I was out on the street, as you can imagine. They were really interesting students, really interesting. And it was too bad. But you know, I just, I went for broke everywhere. I sort of felt like I had an invisible safety net, but I was just lucky, I think.

And then they - the dean said, "We're not firing you, dear, but I think you would do better at the High School of Performing Arts." They transferred me. They had no art department there.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. FISHMAN: And I was, like, a good art teacher, and the students were all excited about me, and I got to teach art for the first time. I got to actually - because they were juniors and seniors, and they were painting, and they

liked what I was telling them, you know, teaching them. And they weren't that - I mean, I was older, but not that much older, and they were interesting students. They were smart. They were New Yorkers. And so I enjoyed that, and I found, like, I had a little bit more of a voice, not a big one, but I did have a voice, and I could - and I saw that I was good, and they appreciated it.

Performing Arts - they would have me working in the office half the time, and there would be like - you know, a teacher would be sick, and I'd go and sub, but I couldn't teach any of the courses they were teaching. You know, it was like math - whatever.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. FISHMAN: But then, the Kent State [University, OH] thing [shootings] happened, and the students went on strike, and I went on strike. That was the end of that job. I mean, fortunately, I very slowly started to get little teaching jobs, Columbia [University] on Saturdays; I got Pratt [Institute] a couple of days a week. And I slowly - you know, I was living so modestly -

MS. RICHARDS: You were still in the loft?

MS. FISHMAN: I was there for a while.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that 1969?

MS. FISHMAN: I was there for a while, then I moved to another loft, on West Broadway and Spring [Street], above what became the Spring Street Bar. That was a small loft, but it was just big enough for me to work in. That other loft, they kicked everybody out of the building, and eventually they tore it down. But there was a fire in the building - it was a very colorful building.

I mean, there was a motorcycle gang that camped out on the roof, and there were the Hell's Angels - you know, there was a theater on the first floor, and they did this theater piece called Che, and there was live sex, and it was also - there was like - there was a Jewish organization picketing because there was a swastika someplace, and then there was - the motorcycle gang threw something through the window, and then the police were shutting the play down, and there was a fire somebody set in the building. We all had to leave. I was on the street with - holding one cat in each arm. And my place was only smoke damaged. It wasn't fire damaged.

But I was on the street, and Abbie Hoffman came over to me, and he said, he said to me, "Dear, do you have a place to sleep tonight?" And I had a girlfriend at the time who was an architect, and she was going to put me up at her house. Actually, I was allowed to go back in there. I shouldn't have, because of the smoke, but I did anyway. But you know, they were right there, the Yuppies, the Yippies, the Yippies.

And it was so sweet. I thought, the last thing I want to do is sleep with the Yuppies and my two cats. [They laugh.] But I was also then working - I had a part-time job five days a week working at the Cooper Hewitt Museum at Cooper Union, so it was like half a block.

MS. RICHARDS: The Cooper Union Museum or the Cooper Hewitt?

MS. FISHMAN: It was called the Cooper Hewitt Museum, and it was a museum that is now the Cooper Hewitt Museum that the Smithsonian owns, runs, but then it was part of Cooper Union. And it was the Hewitt sisters like you probably know. They had this - and the museum and the library.

I worked in the library as an assistant to the librarian. And I was in charge of - it was a library of the decorative arts, and I was in charge of the rare book collection and the picture library. I mean, what that meant is I organized the pictures that came in through the picture library. And when people came in and needed to do research, I would go and get them the books because they couldn't - only the staff could handle the rare books, but I would put them on the tables for them and help them with the research.

MS. RICHARDS: So you were living on West Broadway.

MS. FISHMAN: No. It was Cooper - I was still at Cooper Square when I was teaching - when I was working there. I'm sorry. I'm backtracking a little bit. I got a job when I was living in Cooper Square, and that was in the school. That was a later job.

Then I moved - then - where was I - I was teaching then. That was when I was teaching. And I didn't live there that long because I got involved with Esther Newton and ended up moving into her apartment and painting in her living room - she gave me her living room to paint in. That was my first big romance.

And Esther was - do you know her name? Esther Newton is a very famous anthropologist, who wrote the first book on drag. She wrote a book called Mother Camp [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972], which is now

a classic. She was finishing it. It was her dissertation at the University of Chicago [IL], and she dedicated - I think she dedicated it to me. Anyway, she was finishing it when we were together. And she was teaching at Queens College [NY].

She was very, very interesting, an interesting mind, did very radical things, and we became involved in the women's movement together. I mean, independently of each other, we were in women's groups. We were in consciousness-raising groups.

MS. RICHARDS: This was '69?

MS. FISHMAN: Probably '68, '69. I was in - I had joined the Redstockings consciousness-raising group. It wasn't that important to me except I learned that, again, I learned I could talk. We were in a circle, and everybody had to speak, and so I had to speak. And I learned how to talk in [a] consciousness-raising group. I learned that I have confidence in - because I was talking from my own experience. It was all you could do.

And then Esther was in Upper West Side W.I.T.C.H. [Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell, socialist feminist groups], and when I got together with her, I joined in that group, and I used to go to their meetings. They were a number of women from the - that were escapees from the Weather Underground. And interesting, very political, and they were really dealing with lesbian issues for the first time. And Esther and I went through the movement together, you know, the beginning of the gay rights movement.

MS. RICHARDS: You also were involved with Women's Caucus for Art?

MS. FISHMAN: Not really. I mean, I was sort of - I was peripheral. What I discovered - first of all, my experience politically was with women who were not in the arts. They were academics, writers. There may have been some. I think Pat Mainardi was an artist, but I didn't know her in terms of her work. I didn't know anybody, any women, who were involved in art who were in the movement.

Then this group formed, and I was interested, but they didn't have much of a consciousness. They weren't educated in terms of feminism. And that was a disappointment. And so they operated - and it seemed to me that their ambitions had to do with careerism, a lot of it, a lot of -

MS. RICHARDS: Issues of women not getting the kind of recognition that men had, representation and -

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah, but I mean, it seemed like it was a route to a career move - I - well, maybe because I have struggled with being competitive. Even though I'm sure I'm very competitive, I kept a very low profile always. I'd made a lot of the wrong moves, you know, if someone was really interested in moving straight up, I probably didn't go that route. I didn't go that route exactly, although I'm very ambitious and I always was. I didn't really get along very well with a lot of those women. I mean, I liked them, but they didn't feel like my people. And they were straight.

And I remember one of the early group meetings, I suggested - and there were a lot of women there - I suggested that we just get in a circle. And I said, "Why don't we get in a circle and everybody speak" - because I had learned how to do this.

And everybody said something, what they wanted, and when it got to me, I said, "My name is Louise Fishman; I'm a lesbian artist," and there was silence. No one said one word, and then we went to the next person.

And I think they just couldn't handle it at all. And I thought, oh, fuck this. This is not for me. There's nobody here. They can't even deal with this. You know, no one said a word. And I thought, I know it's a radical thing to do, to say that, but someone could have said, thank you, or you know -

MS. RICHARDS: Welcome.

MS. FISHMAN: Welcome. Nothing. So I didn't really participate much. I was on the periphery. I went to, like, to the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art] when they were demonstrating.

MS. RICHARDS: At that point, in the late '60s, I think we are in -

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: - what were your - what was your work like? What were your paintings like? I have a few in my mind, but I wanted to ask you. This is before you embarked on the works, I think, '71 to '73 before -

MS. FISHMAN: Or even before that. I think I started maybe in '69.

MS. RICHARDS: Describe your work at that point before the rubber and canvas string, before those paintings,

when they were actually still paintings.

MS. FISHMAN: I was doing these big grid paintings with acrylic.

MS. RICHARDS: Had you been using acrylic all through from art school? You must have been painting with oils then.

MS. FISHMAN: I always used oil paint. And when I went to graduate school, I was introduced to acrylic. It didn't appeal to me, but I realized that everything was changing in the art world, from looking through the magazines. We went to Chicago. I saw an Al Held show. I began to see what Minimalism was - you know, that there was something else, and I was still thinking about Abstract Expressionism and the hand, the mark of the hand.

And I thought, I've got to change this. I want to be - I want to see what this feels like. And so I did some - and I was - I've always been interested in sculpture. I think I should have probably done sculpture. I mean, certainly at that point, because who interested me - Tony Smith and Sol LeWitt and the grid interested me, from Mondrian and other painters, you know, the Bauhaus and the Russian Constructivists, and you know, I was really interested in a lot of that work. So it wasn't that difficult to make a shift into working with shapes.

I was doing, not shaped canvases, but I was making these shapes, simple colors, and taping the edges. And from there I began, when I got to New York, working with these grids of intersecting bands of color that were based on LeWitt. You know, those intersecting white wood pieces.

And they were somewhat large paintings. Some of them were smaller. I lost a whole group of small ones that I liked, actually, the most, in a way. I think they accidentally got thrown out by somebody. They were in a roll, but I have slides of them, so I least I have a record. But it was a very interesting time.

And I became very involved in this process, and it was about just the color changing between them and the kind of structure I was making. And I had always been interested in architecture in my work and the idea of living in a space, creating a space.

And actually the boyfriends I had were architects. When I went out with men, I went out with men that did work that interested me. [Laughs.] So there were several architects, three architects in that group. And I, of course, grew up in Philadelphia, so Louis I. Kahn was very important.

So this was not that remote in a way except - you know, and I was more interested in Franz Kline than I was in, I don't know - but I was very interested in the sculpture that was going on, and I was interested, not as much, but I was also interested in like Morris Louis and [Kenneth] Noland. But I think in retrospect, what's his name - first person I mentioned. I can't think of his name now.

MS. RICHARDS: Al Held?

MS. FISHMAN: No.

MS. RICHARDS: Tony Smith?

MS. FISHMAN: Tony Smith. Tony Smith was, I think - you know, I like him almost the best, and I still do, his paintings and his sculpture. So that work was about that kind of thing, and then I slowly started to stain them, work with stain. I was still doing grids, but there was more staining involved.

And that's when I first started inviting dealers to my studio. And I was downtown. I was on West Broadway, so I walked over to Paula Cooper, and I walked over to Ivan Karp.

And I went to Karp first, and I showed him my slides. He said, "Oh, let's go look at them. Let's go look at them right now. Where do you live?" I said, "I live a block from here." He said, "Okay, get in my Jeep. We'll go." I said, "I live a block." He said, "That's all right. We're going to drive." And he drove one block to my studio, looked at all my paintings. He said, "I love your work. You're great." He said, "Go to the big galleries." He said, "I'm not the right person for you. I have people that are similar, but it's not exactly right. But don't fool around with small galleries. Go to the top." That was his advice.

And then I went to Paula Cooper. And I didn't think I was even going to get a rise out of him [Karp], because it was hard to do - you know, get a response. So I went to Paula Cooper, and I showed her - and in fact, I went to the - she was upstairs on Prince Street, and I went up there with my slides.

And I bumped into Gerry Hayes. And I went into - I was in the main - you know, the showing space. And Gerry came over, and he said, hey. And I said, "Hey, want to get coffee?" And he said, "Are those slides? Did you bring slides to show Paula?" And I said, "Yes, but she's not here." And he said, "She doesn't walk around the gallery. She's in the back." I said, "Well, let's go get coffee." And he said, no.

He took me by the hand, and he walked me to the back. And in the back is sitting Elizabeth Weatherford, who was her director at that moment. And I was standing there with my slides, and Elizabeth said to me, "Dear, do you have slides to show to Paula?" [Laughs.] I said, "Yeah." She said, "Well, can we keep them overnight?" She said, "I'll show them to Paula, and we'll get back to you." And I got a call, and Paula wanted to come to the studio. And I was beside myself because she - first, as far as I was concerned, she was the whole nine yards. You know, she had the best, most interesting work.

And before I went out to show my slides to anybody, I covered all my paintings in plastic. I don't know where I got that idea that you had to do that, but, of course, when they came over, I had to take the plastic off and show them. And Paula said that she wanted to come back again. And she liked what I was doing. She pointed to a piece on the wall which was - you know, I had been doing these stain paintings, and I had these tests of grays and things.

And I had taken two pieces of canvas that were painted and I cut the shape out, and I fitted them together, and I stapled it, and I put it on the wall. It looks like just the cut-wood pieces that I did later in the '70s. And she said, "And that's pretty interesting." And that was just there as a kind of throwaway, you know. I liked that, obviously, or either I wouldn't have put it up. But it wasn't what I was showing her.

And she left and I had a migraine headache for three days. And I thought, I always thought that I got migraine headaches because I was a failure. And here's this, you know, it was the beginning of something, and it was sort of like everywhere I went, there was interest. And so that was an interesting thing. I was still on West Broadway.

[END CD 3.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Louise Fishman on December 31, 2009, in Chelsea, 526 West 26th Street, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc four.

MS. FISHMAN: So in 1970 - I think in 1970, maybe, or could have even been '69; I think it was '70 - no, I think it was earlier. I think it was like '69. I - in the summer, I had gotten into a - I had formed a woman's group, a CR group, with a few women that I had met.

MS. RICHARDS: CR - consciousness-raising?

MS. FISHMAN: Consciousness-raising.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay.

MS. FISHMAN: Because I was the only one that had the experience, and they were artists. It was Trisha Brown and - now this woman Patsy Norvell, and then there was another woman, who was one of the founders of the Food restaurant over on - I can't think of her name - a very nice woman. She was with Richard Nonas, and then she got involved with that wonderful artist who did these slices of buildings.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, [Gordon] Matta-Clark.

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah, she was involved with him. And I remember meeting her on the subway one day, and she was in tears. They'd just found out about this brain tumor that he had. But she was in the group. And I think that was it. It was just a small group, and it met in my loft at West Broadway.

MS. RICHARDS: What - what number was that on West Broadway?

MS. FISHMAN: It was the corner building, and it - you entered -

MS. RICHARDS: At Spring and West Broadway.

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah. I don't remember the exact address of it. But it was a renovated loft. The owner - the landlord had - he put in heat - and a bathroom and hot water.

MS. RICHARDS: It was luxurious for a SoHo loft.

MS. FISHMAN: It was really luxurious. I think the rent was \$375, which was - or maybe it was \$275, but it was really high. But everything was there and I didn't have to do anything, and I really liked that. And it - and I was with an architect, and she designed a loft bed over painting racks next to a little hallway that went to the bathroom, and across - across this tiny little hall was all the shelves for all my clothes and storage. It was extremely succinct. The kitchen was in the studio, and everything was - it was open there, and it had a little tiny space for living.

And so I met with these women in the summer. We'd all been camping together, and I met - actually, I met

Trisha through Esther. I was living with Esther at the time. And Esther and Richard Nonas had - were both teaching anthropology in Queens then. He's - he was just working part-time. And he had - they were good friends, and they - we sort of met each other in a Yvonne Rainer concert and - who was - I went to every concert that she gave, every - everything that she ever did, I went to. I was totally enamored of her and her work. And she taught a class of mine. It was another extraordinary moment for me.

I accidentally walked into - I was - lived on Cooper Square, and I was around the corner at the Anderson Theater, had a dance concert, and I was by myself. I thought, I like dance; I don't usually see dance. I think I'll go in. It was like two dollars or something. And I went in and it was - it was Yvonne and her group. And I walked in, and I see the audience was full of artists, famous artists. I thought, what's this about? And then I see her come out. And she's - she's out there with, like, slacks and T-shirt and sneakers and moving like an athlete. And there was the grid; there was that geometry, and it was so disciplined and tight, and I thought it was - I couldn't believe it. And I thought, a woman making art in a physical way. And not just physical, but in this extraordinary discipline which I really connected to.

So I took Esther to - you know, there were these concerts in people's lofts and stuff, and we met - she met - she saw Richard, and they talked together. So he invited us to come over, and he was - I think he was with Trisha at the time. No, he was with this other woman, and Trisha came to a party, and Patsy Norvell lived downstairs, and - I mean - so I met - that's how I met Patsy. And it's funny how these things open up like that.

But at the end of the summer, you know, that we talked about - I mean, I - I'd started a standard consciousness-raising session with all the rules. And what happened is Trisha, by the end of the summer, decided she was leaving her husband and did - boom, just like that.

And Patsy said, "I really want to continue this." And so a couple of months later, I actually met - I was teaching - when I was teaching at Music & Art, Jenny Snider's sister Amy Snider, who I taught with and who was married to Joel Shapiro at the time, introduced me to Jenny. And I somehow asked Jenny if she wanted to join us. We were going to do a woman's group, and she said, "Yeah, sure."

Patsy brought Harmony Hammond in, who was a neighbor of hers. They knew - all knew each other, and they knew her husband or something. Sarah Draney, who was a friend of Patsy's who lived in the same building, and Elizabeth Weatherford who - I don't know how - who she was connected to, but, you know, I didn't know anybody except Patsy and then Jenny. I didn't know them well. And that was the group. I think I got all - all of them.

And Esther was in the group first with us, and her woman issue was collaborating on a book with Shirley, Shirley Fischler. Anyway, because they were, you know, she thought of it as making art. I mean, she went through a little period where she wanted to be an artist like me. She really was a much better anthropologist, and she - I mean, I hate to - but you know, she's - and she - her writing is beautiful in anthropology; it's perfect. She's very important in the movement in lots of ways, wrote very important papers, including an analysis of consciousness raising, comparing the process to a religious conversion, which was a wonderful idea. Those anthropologists are so smart.

And they lasted just a couple of weeks in the group, because it became clear that the hierarchy was about the visual arts. And although we tried to accommodate them, it didn't work. And so they'd pulled out angrily. And so I - you know, kind of - I really taught them how to do this process, and I was the heavy, because I was the lesbian, and I was the one who had the background in politics - gay and feminist politics.

And we decided to go to - we started out just meeting in one place, and then we began to go to each other's studios. And we started really talking about what it was like for us as women artists and - even though they were all involved with men. And I could see how their - how they make connections that I was unable to make because they've had men who were involved - many of them were involved with the arts, or they had - they knew each - they all knew - they all had networks. And I didn't.

And I learned a lot about - like, I didn't even know how to - how you do it. How you go - I thought that - the way you get into a Whitney [Museum of American Art, New York, NY] Biennial is you're painting in your studio, and someone, like a curator, is walking along, looks up and sees you doing your painting, and they come running up, "We want you!" [Laughs.] It was all magic for me. I had no knowledge. And I learned a few things. So I learned how to do that, you know, how to get the slides and do that.

And you know - and they had, you know, their male artist friends had curators that came by, and they - so there were certain connections and whatever; most of them really struggled terribly - all of them did, actually - all of them. It was a rough ride for every single one of us. Elizabeth was an - also an anthropologist and is now the head of the - what is it - films - as in films - films on ethnicity or something at the Smithsonian [Film and Video Center, George Gustav Heye Center of the National Museum of the American Indian, New York, NY]. She was married - she is married to Murray Reich, and he's a painter, who taught at Bard [College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY].

And Patsy is a sculptor, very fine one, whose work I love, and Sara was a sculptor. Harmony was straight and came out - I don't know how long it took, but she just finally decided that that's what she wanted to do. And there was - one of the - someone I knew back then, though I've actually just kind of communicated with her over Facebook, is Judy Rifka, who I had met when I was on - had a loft on Canal Street in '70 - early '70s - that's where I did a lot of that work.

MS. RICHARDS: On Canal Street?

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, we haven't gotten to that yet.

MS. FISHMAN: No. And the work I did - what happened is I got involved with this woman's group, and for a while my work didn't change. My work had never changed. It was never - it was, like, a very private part of my life with movement stuff. It - you know, they were all right. There were certain groups of women that worked on journals, their journals. They're writing groups. There're these kinds of groups, all kinds of political groups, teachers, got together. There wasn't - there weren't any visual artists doing this. So this was, you know, it was the first time I - that I allowed my work to - you know, opened it up to this political arena and to other people, to other women.

And at a certain point, I decided that I sort of had a realization that everything I had done up until then was based on male ideas and male artists and my attempt to be something other than what I was. It wasn't that I felt like my work was wrong or bad, but that - that I had to rethink everything. And -

MS. RICHARDS: Is that when you became interested in Eva Hesse's work?

MS. FISHMAN: It was a little before that. It happened in the group and after the group, you know, like, it - during the meetings - and I started really thinking about scale and materials and that I just accepted the stretched canvas and the tradition of oil paint on canvas without having any questions about it. Well, in a way, it was a perfect way to do my work. [Laughs.] But I thought, I just accepted all of it. I accepted the tradition.

MS. RICHARDS: Didn't you have a kind of intuitive love of the work of de Kooning and Kline and Abstract Expressionism?

MS. FISHMAN: I did, I did and I still do. It was -

MS. RICHARDS: And Mitchell?

MS. FISHMAN: Mitchell and - well - and the whole history of art - [Chaim] Soutine. I adore Soutine and Piero della Francesca and, you know, Giotto [di Bondone] and Masaccio [Tommaso di Ser Giovanni di Simone] and Titian [Tiziano Vecelli] and [Francisco] Goya. You know, I'm extremely involved in the history of painting and great art. I mean, I - there's nothing better. It's like a good - really good meal.

MS. RICHARDS: But at that point, you felt that the main points in your constellation that were male artists, LeWitt and Kline and others -

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: - thinking about the grid and the Minimalists -

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: - that there was something you needed - other, that you needed to do.

MS. FISHMAN: Well, you know, when I went to art school, I became very aware that I was a fake, because I was a girl and I was trying to be a boy. I mean, in a way, in order to paint, in order to be in this - I thought like I was a part of this tradition - and then I was thinking, but I'm a girl - there aren't any girls in this tradition.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you know of the work of those few women Abstract Expressionists like Grace Hartigan, Lee Krasner?

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah, I knew them. I knew their - I knew their work. But I didn't think of them - I mean, I thought - let's see - I thought they were okay. Mitchell, I thought was really good. I never liked Hartigan that much. I mean, she was - I liked her early on, but, you know, the more I learned about painting, the less I was interested in the others. And I just always liked Joan Mitchell.

MS. RICHARDS: So at this point, you were thinking about other models and other artists. You were also questioning the materials and the idea of working on a canvas to begin with. Did these things happen

simultaneously - question the ideas and questioning the -

MS. FISHMAN: The whole thing. Everything happened at once. It was like - in my head, I have this idea of how you're supposed to do this work and who you're supposed to be, and it's all wrong, and I have to invent myself totally in every way. Every choice I make, no matter what I do, I'm not going to use the stretched canvas again unless I invent it myself, you know; I didn't invent it, but I came to it in a natural way.

So I just put myself out on a total - a beam over the water, or - I mean, I was really in space. I decided just to sit down with a piece of paper and pencil and to see where it got me. And I started just cutting up - well, I started cutting up these canvasses - cut up the grids. And I started thinking about all these traditions that I had abhorred, women's traditions of, you know, weaving and sewing and whatever women did. I thought, I'm going to become that. I'm going to become - it's like, you know - it's like in the gay male tradition - in a gay - in a homosexual tradition - revolution, you identify with the lowest common denominator, and that's probably true in every big movement. The most flagrant drag queen was who you were.

You know, you had to really immerse yourself in the extreme of what this identity was. And I thought, you know, I've had such disdain for what women do and who women are, and it's obviously self-hatred. So I thought, I want to learn what this feels like. [Laughs.] And so I began knotting and sewing. First, I was just sewing, then I was cutting things up, and then I was - you can't take - you know, you can't take your eyes and your memory away. So I was doing these things, but obviously, I was influenced by all the traditions, you know, Dada, for instance, and other traditions. And Surrealism, no doubt - and - but what I saw was, you know, just invention. And it was the most inspiring - that period, in general, was the most thrilling period that most of my friends have ever been through. It was so alive and nourishing and original.

So - and then I had - at this job at Cooper Union, I had met Eva Hesse. She was a friend of the librarian there, and she was in school there. She would go and visit the librarian, Edith, lovely woman. I don't remember her last name. I've lost track of her. But you know - so we used to have little conversations. And we actually both cut our hair at the same time. We talked about what it was like to have, you know - and she had long hair before she cut hers. Mine was long, too, when I cut mine. So it was, like, funny little connections that we had. And I didn't know too much about her. I hadn't seen much of her work. I knew a little bit about her work. I didn't think - I didn't - you know, she wasn't famous at the time. And then I find out that she'd died. You know, I didn't know she was sick, because I wasn't that close to her or anybody who knew her. I mean, I didn't know that community.

And I remember seeing that there was a little memorial show at Visual Arts, so I went over there -

MS. RICHARDS: Visual Arts?

MS. FISHMAN: School of Visual Arts [New York, NY].

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm [affirmative].

MS. FISHMAN: And I went in to that room, and it had so much reverberation for me, that work, and I said - I kind of said - you know, there was a painter who became a sculptor. And I always felt like I was a sculptor straddling somewhere long the line, and I thought, you know, I could do anything I want. I'm going to use this rubber stuff; I'm going to do - I'm going to do whatever I feel like doing. I'm going to use this stuff. Let me find this stuff.

So I went to Canal Street, and I bought liquid rubber and - I mean, I didn't have access to the materials or the loft space or whatever that she had or the information that she had from her husband and the community she was in. So I was really isolated as an artist. But I - I just started making whatever I felt like, and I think I started - the rubber, I started coating those pieces. And I coated paper, and I mixed it with paint, and I put it on. I mean, it was small-scale, everything was small, and I didn't think much of the individual pieces. Actually, they were pretty good. A lot of them I destroyed because I - you know, it was really about moving. It was less about staying anyplace. But the pieces themselves, I'm sorry now that I didn't keep little sculptures and things that were - that generate a lot of other things, and -

MS. RICHARDS: You were working with found materials, as well, I think.

MS. FISHMAN: That then - then what happened is I slowly - I was getting materials on - I don't remember the exact order of this. But I was doing all those stitched pieces and stuff, and I gradually - you know, the more I worked on the canvas - that was strips of canvas, I started using raw canvas; I was actually painting them - you know, staining them and doing things that involve more esthetic decisions, I guess, maybe. I don't know if that's the right word for this.

But then I - and I started finding cut pieces of wood that were just on the street, in the building, and I painted on found pieces, because I didn't want to - I didn't want to be drawing material that I was working on. I wanted to be making it; I wanted it to just arrive, and respond to it. And so I did a series of pieces on found wood, and then

I started buying sheets of plywood - four-by-eight sheets - and cutting them up, and then painting and cutting the edges as I paint. So they were happening - you know, the outside and the inside group developing more or less together.

And then I - that was my first show - one-person show. Before that, I had done - I had found these Masonite circles - 11.5-inch Masonite circles - on Canal Street, and I bought the whole group, like 30 of them, and I just painted circle paintings for a year or two - I don't know how long.

MS. RICHARDS: Was - at that point, you were using acrylic?

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah, mostly acrylic. I was still using acrylic, some oil - there's a little bit of oil in there, in the circle paintings.

And when my group did a show, I showed the circle paintings and circle drawings. They were all - all working around.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm [Affirmative].

MS. FISHMAN: And you know, after I'd finished the circle paintings, I didn't know where to go. And that's when I found the wood pieces. But it was all about finding things, and then gradually I was inventing the edges and the shapes and -

MS. RICHARDS: And then color came back into the work -

MS. FISHMAN: Well, I -

MS. RICHARDS: Nineteen seventy-three.

MS. FISHMAN: Well, what happened was, I'd gone to -'74 probably, I had gone to the Art Institute of Chicago [IL] to teach, and they were supposed to give me a studio, so I could work on these pieces. And I got there, and I was in an apartment. And so what I did is I -

MS. RICHARDS: That was actually '75.

MS. FISHMAN: Seventy-five, I went to Chicago, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. FISHMAN: I -

MS. RICHARDS: Before that, I'm looking at something that's called The Triptych. It was 12 by 37, and acrylic and chalk and rubber silicone. But what I noticed was there was a kind of -

MS. FISHMAN: Oh, it's pastel.

MS. RICHARDS: - a rigorous brush work with reds, as well as blacks.

MS. FISHMAN: Oh, yeah. No, you know, that - oh, there was that whole group of things that came in series - a serial form, like - and that was - you know what that was? It was an attempt to write a journal.

MS. RICHARDS: Acrylic and chalk, yeah.

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah. It was all - I thought of - you know, I really was very - I wished I could have been a writer. You know, there I was, everybody was -

MS. RICHARDS: As well as a sculptor. [Laughs.]

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah. And at that point, I was very jealous about that journal process, and so I began painting. It was like a journal that I was making. And I -

MS. RICHARDS: Were you actually keeping a written journal at the same time?

MS. FISHMAN: Somewhat, but I didn't have the skill, I didn't think, to, you know, really keep a proper journal the way these other women who were academics or writers. I mean, I was in the midst of - you know, Jill Johnston and Esther Newton and Kate Millett was around, and Bertha Harris was a novelist and, you know, and a whole slew of people who were publishing books and doing interesting work.

MS. RICHARDS: I'm sorry. Bertha who?

MS. FISHMAN: Bertha Harris.

MS. RICHARDS: That's right.

MS. FISHMAN: And so it was a way of - sort of fake writing, and it started out, and I had a series of pieces. And it was almost like I - I had a little - a method. And the method was, well, then I would divide each one up into four parts, or so many parts, and I would start in a corner of one and then go to the corner of the second, the top corner of the third, et cetera, and then go back with a new color and - and it was like a calligraphy; it was like a writing. And - until - and then afterwards, I realized that they were looking like pictographs, you know, like cartoons almost, but of abstract calligraphy. And then I started losing interest in the serial idea - you know, working on a number of pages in a way, and so I was veering towards a single - singular image.

MS. RICHARDS: Your work that time, and right before that, was just canvas and thread and string and stitching and tying, and they were very simple kinds of ascetic forms. And they're quite radical in terms of your being a painter. Were you intentionally looking for a way to break new ground? Was that a kind of a conscious pursuit?

MS. FISHMAN: It was less about breaking new ground. It was more about breaking my own ground. You know, I was looking for what was original to me, you know, and not following in a path that had already been broken, path that had been followed. And the - I think what I was doing had its own originality, but it didn't - you know, I - I needed to make it mine, and I needed to know that I was doing something that was mine and not part of, you know, I was just picking up something that really didn't belong to me.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there any conscious references, or were you looking at work that European artists were doing at that time?

MS. FISHMAN: No, not at all. I was just - I was just in front - I had stuff in front of me, and I was just putting them together. I didn't want to have any - I wasn't looking anywhere else. When I was in art school, I remember thinking, there are no women in these history books. I'm a fake. You know, who am I? I'm pretending I'm a man in order to make these paintings. And they all accept me, but I'm a fake, you know?

MS. RICHARDS: In '73, you did a series called the Angry Paintings.

MS. FISHMAN: So - yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Talk about those. And also, those were the works of yours that were included in "WACK! [Art and the Feminist Revolution." The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA. Los Angeles, March 4-July 16, 2007], I believe.

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And I was - someone asked you to talk about those works and how you felt about the selection of those works in that show, for that show.

MS. FISHMAN: Well, they selected the -

MS. RICHARDS: But, I mean, were you happy with that selection? You think that was -

MS. FISHMAN: You mean, to have the Angry Paintings in the show? Oh, yeah, it was a very appropriate thing, because that - I didn't realize how appropriate it was, in many ways, until, you know - I wasn't supposed to be in that show.

Catherine Lord called me from Los Angeles, and she said, "Louise, I've been asked to write an essay for the show on the lesbian work that was created in the '70s." And she said, "You're not in the show, but I've always been interested in your Angry Paintings - your Angry Women Paintings - and I want to come and talk to you about them. Can I see them?" And I said, you know - and I didn't even know her. I said, "Catherine, I'm not even sure where they are." You know, "I think I can find them."

And so she came to the studio, and we started talking, and we met for about three or four hours. We hit it off really well, and there were a lot - she was really interested in lots of things about me and my work and about what I had to say about that period. And then I got another call from her: "Louise, I'm coming back. Can I come and talk to you again?"

Anyway, there were like four visits. She said, "I have to tell you that my entire essay is written through the eyes of your paintings, looking at the whole period. And I've submitted it to Connie Butler," and she did. Connie Butler said, "Oh" - [laughs] - "oh, duh, well, maybe I should look at these paintings that Catherine said, duh." And so she did. She flew out to New York and saw them at Cheim & Read [Gallery], and put them in a show.

MS. RICHARDS: So you had, by that time, brought some of them to the gallery? Were they there?

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah. We got - I got them to the gallery. I mean -

MS. RICHARDS: How many were there?

MS. FISHMAN: There were 30. One of them was destroyed in a flood. I had given a few away. I gave - and I decided not to do that because I think they should be together. Now, first - my first inclination was to give each one to the person who the painting was about them. So I gave one to Esther Newton, and I gave one to Alix Dobkin, who was a folk singer who had sung with [Bob] Dylan, and, you know, she was involved in that folk scene in the [West] Village at the same time. And we'd gone to art school together; we were very close at times.

And I gave her her painting - Angry Alix [1973], and it was in a flood. So she said, "Would you paint me another one?" I said, "I'm sorry I can't." I don't paint - anyway, I painted one new one, which was Angry Hillary [1973]. Which is a nice painting. And I gave one - I made one for Catherine. It was private - it was a different size - for her birthday. She really loved being part of that group. But, basically, the group was painted in 1973.

MS. RICHARDS: And this was a huge departure for you, and, actually, I don't know if you've ever used words in paintings again. So what part does that series play in the body of your work?

MS. FISHMAN: Well, it's a very important thing. First of all, it had to do with rage. It just - I didn't have any control. It just was, like, I was so angry, I had to do - I had to make something, because I was unfit to be in the studio or to be alive. I was so angry. It all came to me about how repressed everything was and how little I had to go on and how much I struggled and all of us - my mother, my aunt. You know, I mean, it was like the book opened and I was - am on fire. And so that's what happened.

It was interesting to me. I mean, I've always been interested in Hebrew calligraphy, just looking at it, and I always wanted to learn how to read it, to read Yiddish, the language. And I didn't have any access to it, and - but I loved it. I loved what it looked like, and I was always interested in calligraphy - mostly Chinese.

And I was interested in writing, and I had to use the word "angry," so I was writing and - but what Catherine pointed out - now, I didn't realize this - you know, I've gone in and out of periods of calligraphic painting. I mean, where there's more of a drawn - almost like a letter, and then periods when there's more formal, more geometry, whatever, and then mixed things. And she said to me, "These paintings are the source for all your recent work." And I thought of them as an anomaly that had nothing to do with anything else. And, of course, she was right. They were, like, the fire; everything came up in these paintings.

What was irrepressible, I guess. And that was really enlightening to me, because I - you know, anytime anything gets put together like that, it's like a miracle. You know, suddenly what I'd done made sense. You know, it wasn't like this thing over here was really crucial to my work. So, in a way - and they were on rectangles - and you know, I had to go to Chicago, and I did these paintings on paper and blah-blah-blah. So I was working my way back to a rectangle.

MS. RICHARDS: After you did that, then you were a visiting artist at the Art Institute [of Chicago].

MS. FISHMAN: I was there in '75, I guess -

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. FISHMAN: - after my first show.

MS. RICHARDS: How did that first show come about? I think it was at Nancy Hoffman Gallery -

MS. FISHMAN: Well, what happened is -

MS. RICHARDS: - for a solo show.

MS. FISHMAN: One of the - well, Nancy Hoffman had just left French & Co., and was opening her own space. And one of the women in the group knew her and said she was interested in seeing the work of the group. She came, and she gave us a show and signed us all on for her gallery.

MS. RICHARDS: Everyone in that group?

MS. FISHMAN: Everyone in the group, except for Elizabeth is an anthropologist. But what happened was, I was the only one that asked for a show. I had this body of work, and I invited her over with these cut-wood pieces, and she said, "Great, let's do it." It was her first year at the gallery - second year, I guess, because the first year we did the group show. And nobody else asked her for a show, and I think maybe Jenny did later and she wasn't interested. And basically, she didn't show anybody else. And I just - you know, had a gallery suddenly. I had been showing my work to Paula, and Paula had been actually showing -

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, you mentioned that she said she wanted to come back to the studio.

MS. FISHMAN: She came back a number of times, and she put two paintings of mine in a group show there, and it was just like - if I had just stayed with her, I probably would have been showing with Paula.

But what happened is, when Nancy offered us the show - and to represent us - I felt very torn, because it was my woman's group, and I had a commitment to this group. And I didn't give myself time to really think about it and what it meant for me and to be able to make a choice for myself rather than for the other women in my life. And it was an important show to do, but I didn't have to sign on with her. And if I had had my druthers - if I knew how to take care of myself at that point, I would have just had that show and continued to pursue the link with Paula, because that's what she did. You know, she showed people in group shows, and then she would give them a two-person show with someone else. That's what she did with Elizabeth.

Elizabeth said to me - Elizabeth Murray - she saw these two paintings of mine in a group show, and she said - she said, "Louise, I cried because I thought you got there first." But I wasn't there for long. And I really, to this day, think of Paula as, you know, a - one of the crucial - really crucial people. I mean, Klaus [Kertiss] was very important. Paula was the most important, I think. I think the most - you know, and has been consistent in what she does, and, you know, I just really like what - I just like who she was as a dealer.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hm [affirmative]. So after the show at Nancy's, then you went to Chicago.

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you feel the show was successful?

MS. FISHMAN: Oh, very. It was very successful. Actually, I sold circle paintings out of that last show. Ron Gorchov bought one. There were a couple of other people who bought one - and that's how I met Ron Gorchov. He came to - asked to come to the studio. He said he could have bought any one of those paintings. They were all interesting to him. And so I had a little relationship with him, short - sort of interesting. I mean, he really loved women artists. I'm sure you know about him and Marilyn Lenkowsky and so many women that he was with. But - and I think probably - I may have met other people through him, but I'm not sure. I think I only met him actually.

Bill Jensen tipped his hat at me in the street. I didn't know who he was. He wasn't really showing much at the time. But he really loved those pieces of mine. And I had like, you know, people paying attention suddenly. I - nobody was paying attention before. And it got reviewed. Carter Radcliff wrote a big review in some magazine that disappeared a couple of years later.

MS. RICHARDS: So at that point, you wouldn't have thought you'd made a mistake?

MS. FISHMAN: I had a lot of questions, but at that point, Nancy's gallery hadn't really - didn't have a face on it yet, and she was showing - you know, Jack Tworikov and Susan Hall, who at that time had a, you know, nice little reputation. Her work was sort of interesting then, and it was unclear who else she was going to be showing. And then after I had the show, then I went back to working on stretched canvas again -

MS. RICHARDS: But did you - before you went to Chicago?

MS. FISHMAN: No, I - when I went to -

MS. RICHARDS: Why did you go to Chicago?

MS. FISHMAN: I went to Chicago to teach. I was asked to teach at the Art Institute.

MS. RICHARDS: And you accepted that because -

MS. FISHMAN: It was a two-month position.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, it was only two months.

MS. FISHMAN: And I had decided to go - I needed teaching experience, and it was - you know, looked nice on my résumé, et cetera. And had provided - supposedly provided me with a studio, which they didn't really. And it was dopey thing.

But anyway, I began working on paper, rectangles. And what I thought I was doing is making little models or little drawings for things that I would make when I went home out of woodcut. But the more I worked on them, the more they became part of the rectangle, and I realized when I got back that I was using the - I was painting on a rectangle and that I had suddenly incorporated it. But it was by accident, you know, and so - and I had a show of those paintings on paper. And right after that I decided, you know, time to go back to the rectangle. I

felt like the paper was too flat against the wall. I wanted something that projected away from it, and stretchers and, okay, linen - you know, let's use the materials I learned how to use that really work.

So I had these beautiful stretchers made. I put a beautiful ground on them and the rabbit- skin glue. I did it really well, and then I started painting.

MS. RICHARDS: And where was your studio at that time?

MS. FISHMAN: Well, it -

MS. RICHARDS: You weren't on West Broadway.

MS. FISHMAN: It was on West 18th Street. I had a little studio for about five years.

MS. RICHARDS: When you moved from West Broadway, you moved to West 18th?

MS. FISHMAN: Let's see, no. When I moved from West Broadway, I moved to - Esther Newton's apartment on 99th Street on the West side, then I - when I was up there, I realized it was - I couldn't work in a living room anymore. So I rented half of Joan Thorne's loft over on - I think it was Mercer Street - it was in SoHo. That's when I painted the Angry Paintings and all those written things, all those calligraphic paintings that I did.

And after that -what did I do after that? Oh, Joan Snyder, who I knew briefly, bumped into me on the subway and said, "I'm looking for someone in - to rent a floor in my building." "We have a net lease; do you want to look at it?" I said, yeah. So Esther and I moved into the space on Canal and Mulberry [Streets].

I'm going to close the window.

MS. RICHARDS: Sure. I'm going to pause it.

[Audio Break.]

So Joan Snyder offered you -

MS. FISHMAN: Oh, she was - she offered me this space in this building, and it was a big loft. Joan Snyder was upstairs with Larry Fink, who she was married to at the time. And downstairs -

MS. RICHARDS: Where is this?

MS. FISHMAN: On the corner of Mulberry and Canal. And it was right on - right on Canal, like the building would thump when the trucks would go through these holes, potholes. It was really something. But it was fabulous space to work in, fabulous light.

MS. RICHARDS: Who else lived there?

MS. FISHMAN: Downstairs was Jackie Winsor and Keith Sonnier, and there were two guys on the second floor - I don't remember their names. I don't think they were artists, but they kept - they had iguanas and snakes, and, you know, it was one of these - freight elevators that we'd rolled up and down in, opened the door at their floor, and he was standing with a big snake wrapped around his neck, like - [laughs] - that they fed mice to. Oy vey!

MS. RICHARDS: Boa constrictor.

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah, yeah, I think. So it was really - it was exciting because I got to know all these people. And Joan - you know, when Joan first started to show, I thought she was really terrific, you know, that - I forget that Lo Giudice [Gallery] - was it? I think that's the name of the gallery - Lo Giudice, on maybe Wooster Street in SoHo.

And I remember also Harriet Korman starting to show then, and I thought she was absolutely terrific - both of them, women painters doing, really, what looked like really good work to me. Harriet, I think, is a terrific painter, period. And so it was really nice to have - to be around artists. And I didn't really - you know, I wasn't really close to any of them. But we spent time and I actually - you know, I did meditation, so did Jackie. And Jackie had a macrobiotic cooking class in her studio - she didn't teach it, but she had somebody who came and taught, and I took the class.

So it was a nice little community. But I wasn't - probably because I was not straight - I mean, Joan was straight then. She still acts like she's straight. But I didn't have those connections, you know, and I didn't really have an interest in socializing with straight people in that way, go to the bars or whatever. I mean, I did before, but I'd lost interest. And my life was very different.

MS. RICHARDS: Other than the teaching in Chicago and you had a show, were you surviving without other work, or were you doing teaching?

MS. FISHMAN: I did a lot of teaching, a lot of adjunct teaching. I was at Pratt; I was at Visual Arts; I also started teaching at [Cooper] Union - yeah. Pratt, I had a - sort of the - you know, it was all part-time - all adjunct.

MS. RICHARDS: I wanted to ask you a couple of questions about teaching, so we can do it right now. When you taught, have you always taught painting, or have you taught drawing?

MS. FISHMAN: Drawing and painting.

MS. RICHARDS: And so there've been a number of different short-term teaching positions. You have mentioned Columbia. Was there ever a time when you were looking for and got a more permanent kind of teaching job?

MS. FISHMAN: I - I didn't really want to because I - it seemed like I needed my freedom. I needed to not be tied to a regime and to a program.

MS. RICHARDS: So, even as an adjunct instructor, you moved around.

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: I'm saying, wouldn't you have preferred - maybe the circumstances kept you from doing this - being adjunct at the same place for many, many years?

MS. FISHMAN: Well, I was at - not many, many years, but I was at Parsons [The New School for Design] for the - probably the longest. I was at Cooper Union for several years. I liked Cooper; I liked Parsons. But I probably was less permanent than most.

MS. RICHARDS: When it came to renewing your contract, you weren't aggressively trying to make that happen?

MS. FISHMAN: Well, there wasn't exactly a contract. It's whether or not there was a class, you know, and - you know, I did do that thing in Columbia that didn't pay very well. But I taught for a long time, and then I got - they finally gave me graduate classes, and I taught out of the city, you know; I taught a lot of places.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you enjoy teaching?

MS. FISHMAN: I enjoy lots of things about it. What I don't like - it takes a lot of energy from me, and some people don't invest it with the same - you know, with a huge amount of energy. I don't seem to have a choice. I just do. And I deplete myself a little too much.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were teaching in New York, would that be one day a week, two days a week?

MS. FISHMAN: The last teaching was once or twice - I'm not sure. But it was - it wasn't very much. And I was just teaching more graduate classes there, as a kind of, you know, just one-of-a-kind thing.

MS. RICHARDS: Where is that? Which - what you were talking about?

MS. FISHMAN: At Parsons. That was the last place I actually taught - had a regular contract. I taught at Harvard [University, Cambridge, MA] for a semester. I was supposed to teach for a year, but I was commuting, and I thought, because I wanted to work, I have a show, and I realized that I couldn't do it. You know, there was no way on earth that I could teach that kind of dense schedule and, you know, fly, teach, and then fly back and then try to work. Physically, I'm not that - you know, I mean, I'm strong enough to do what I need to do, but I cannot - and there's certain things I can't do. I think I can, but I can't.

MS. RICHARDS: What would you say was your teaching method or your teaching philosophy?

MS. FISHMAN: You know, the best thing I - a couple of things. I learned most things from two traditions - the woman's movement, feminism, what I learned from feminism, and what learned from the Buddhist tradition.

And the first - when I first started teaching, I knew how to talk to people, and I knew how to listen, because that's what you learn in the movement - learn how to listen and to really take in other people's experience and to figure out how to - you know, talk in a nonjudgmental way. And those things were not common in art school. So that was one big thing. And I tried to make a lot of room for whatever a person was trying to do, whether it was in my genre or not, you know, because I - first of all, I assume that I don't have a clue what someone's going to be doing in their work, that there's just some hints of what they are interested in. Some of it's all there - a lot of it's there; most of it isn't apparent - or not to be had yet.

And the other - and the - then I started this meditation, and I realized that I could - that I was just - there's a - an expression - I'm not going to get this exactly right, but in the Buddhist tradition, you sort of rub up against the Buddha. It's like you - you get close and you - and you really sense what's there. And what I did was to really listen and be quiet and take on, really feel who that person was and give them plenty of room.

And the last class I taught, it was a graduate class, and I could do anything I wanted to with them; it was, like, some kind of seminar program. I taught them how to meditate, and the whole class - I had a Zen priest come in and teach them meditation - I had a guy from the Thai tradition, in robes, come in. And we did projects, and we went on a little group trips together. And we went on the Staten Island ferry, and we meditated, and then we looked at the Island of Manhattan, because a lot of them had been - came from all over the world. You know, Parsons is full of kids from everywhere.

And I said, "You know, this is an island; this is what it looks like, and this is where the Trade Center used to be, and this is" - you know, and then we - and they just meditated, and they would keep journals and make work. And they had to each do a project, and it was really interesting. I mean, I did it - I didn't have a clue what I was doing, but it worked very nicely, and it was good, and that's what they - I thought, what does - what do graduate students need? And I thought, they're scared to death; they don't know what they're doing; they're about to enter into a completely unknown area in their lives; they need to learn how to center themselves. I thought, okay, I know how to do that.

[END CD 4.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Louise Fishman on December 21, 2009, in Chelsea, at 526 West 26th Street, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc five.

So that was your approach to teaching, give them what you thought they needed. What effect on your work has teaching had?

MS. FISHMAN: That's a good question. I'm not sure. I think it probably made me think about - stop and think about certain things a little more, because when you're forced to verbalize about something or emphasize something in a body of art, there're so many things you could do. First of all, what I started doing was teaching them how to draw, because a lot of the students didn't know how to look and see and draw. So I was doing - and then I was setting up these installations for them to draw from. And it was like - a little bit like making sculpture. And I got very excited about it. I had a rope going this way and stuff, you know-

MS. RICHARDS: Setups.

MS. FISHMAN: Setups. And I would, like, start them with just a rope, going across, and then I would move it. And then I would add something, and so that they had to keep changing their drawings. So I was getting them to, like, follow me, following my visual instructions. They were actually going through a process that was a little similar to what I did. And I guess you can't, in a way, separate that out. It wasn't like I was teaching them to do what I do, but, in a way, that particular day of work, or these days of work, were really - it wasn't about me so much as a tradition that I came from of, like, putting something down and then moving it and then seeing how it affected the dynamic of a rectangle, which is what I'm about, and the painting is about.

MS. RICHARDS: Before I go back to your work, I want to ask you some questions about working methods. You can think about the answers in terms of your past work as well as your current work. What about preparatory drawings, and also drawing as a finished work of art - let's talk about what part drawing plays in your practice.

MS. FISHMAN: I would say. I never do preparatory drawings, because each - it seems like each thing I do has to originate in itself. And so I could do a drawing, but I could -

Sammy [referring to pet dog], come here - eating something. You spit it out. [Laughs.]

Because the limitations of transferring something to a different scale or a different shape, I just - it made no sense. And I wasn't interested - I found later Franz Kline did these little drawings, and they were exact, and then he transferred them. But that would not have worked for me because that was not - that wouldn't have interested me, as much as I love those paintings and the drawings, that my paintings have to come out of themselves in that act of work.

MS. RICHARDS: How does a painting begin? And has that evolved?

MS. FISHMAN: I don't think it's changed that much. I think it has evolved, but it basically - I've always thought of it as just a response to that particular rectangle and the beauty of that white shape.

MS. RICHARDS: When I was reading about your work and your process, the question in my mind was, how do you

know what size rectangle to work on? It seems like the process is so open-ended and intuitive that you might not want to limit yourself to a particular shape, a particular proportion, a particular size. But in fact, you do make that decision to stretch your canvas and to limit yourself in the sense that you have a specific canvas to work on.

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah, one thing, though, is that anytime I'm about to order stretchers - I no longer make them. I order them - it's a long process. I used to draw shapes on the wall to sight what kind of a shape I wanted to work on.

MS. RICHARDS: So in a way, those are preparatory sketches.

MS. FISHMAN: That's about as far as it goes, yeah. But it's true. It is. It's like that's the playing field that I want to work on. And see they're a tennis court or a basketball court or a hockey field. But - so there're issues of scale and with body size. Of course, I can flip it, so that it can be a more horizontal, landscape format. I don't often do horizontals, but I do occasionally. And I always vary the size. I always have little canvases, great big ones, and everything in between. Although, just recently, I had 10 canvases made the same size and -

MS. RICHARDS: Was that a departure?

MS. FISHMAN: It is. John Cheim and I were looking at MoMA [Museum of Modern Art], went to MoMA. And there was one Pollock that we both were knocked out by. I mean, I adore Pollock. And there was this one Pollock, and John said, "That size is perfect." And I said, "You're absolutely right." I thought it was much bigger than that one.

MS. RICHARDS: That one?

MS. FISHMAN: I thought it was a much bigger canvas. But he sent me an e-mail, and he said, "Why don't you make a whole bunch of those?" And I thought about it. I thought, that's a beautiful size. It's a beautiful sheet. John has a lot of intuition about my work, and he's very smart about what my paintings are about and what I'm doing. And I thought, you know, that's a really interesting idea. That's a departure. I have never ordered a group that is all one size. So I ordered 10 of those.

MS. RICHARDS: What's the dimension that you're talking about?

MS. FISHMAN: I have to measure it. I'll be back in a second. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Is that unusual, to get that kind of pointed feedback, directions and suggestions from your dealer?

MS. FISHMAN: Oh, yes, I've never done it before - 51 - and so that - that I listened, because I said, "Well, that's an interesting idea" - 51 by 30.

MS. RICHARDS: Fifty-one high by 30 wide.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: That's a very strong rectangle, vertical.

MS. FISHMAN: It's really - it has, yes, it really has a tallness to it, a grandness for a small scale. I love it. And we were both - we both responded to the same painting with the same intensity. And I've been thinking about that; like, why do I have to paint great big paintings? Do I need to keep making these great big paintings? I do something very differently on a big scale than I do on a smaller scale, and it does require that expansiveness. It doesn't mean that expansiveness doesn't occur on a smaller scale, but there's a physical, literal expansiveness that is like the sky. It has -

MS. RICHARDS: And yet they're verticals. When we talk about horizontal, we talk about it as a landscape, and vertical as a portrait.

MS. FISHMAN: - yeah, or body.

MS. RICHARDS: Or body.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes, but they still - even though that's a vertical - it's voluminous - it's more like a landscape, in a way, that painting, in the format of it. I mean, it's scattered. It's not like there's no central image, or image that commands that verticality.

MS. RICHARDS: Early on you were using oils, and you switched to acrylics in the early '70s, I think, and you've stayed with acrylics?

MS. FISHMAN: Actually, I switched to acrylics in graduate school in '64. And I stayed working with acrylics until I started working on those paper pieces. They first were acrylic, and then I began using oil. And then I stopped using acrylic. I started using acrylic again at Dartmouth [College, Hanover, NH] a couple of years ago. And I showed some acrylic paintings in my last show, but that's the first time since the '70s.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were using oils, it was always on the linen, although occasionally you used cotton?

MS. FISHMAN: Occasionally, not much, but the cotton ones usually are acrylic lately. Now, that's the only reason I'd used cotton. Not too many of them are cotton. They're either jute or linen.

MS. RICHARDS: And now you're working strictly with acrylics?

MS. FISHMAN: No, primarily with oil, but occasionally still -

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, it just happens that these drawers here are all acrylics.

MS. FISHMAN: - they're all acrylic. But those are my paints. Those are - that's all oil.

MS. RICHARDS: Is there a particular kind of oil that you've always used?

MS. FISHMAN: Well, I've been using Williamsburg [Handmade Oil Colors], which - I knew Carl Plansky, who had inherited Milton Resnick's paint grinding machine. And he started making oil paint for himself, and then he started making it for his friends and selling it very cheaply. So there were like a handful of painters around that were buying it from him. And then he made a business out of it. And then he actually stopped grinding it. He had somebody grinding it for him. And he died recently, Carl. He -

MS. RICHARDS: Plansky.

MS. FISHMAN: - yeah, he had a massive heart attack and was young. He's younger than I am. A painter, who actually was the person who introduced me to Joan Mitchell.

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you about that, how you met Joan Mitchell.

MS. FISHMAN: I was about to go to Europe, and I was going to go to Paris [France] for a week with Betsy, my ex. And Carl used to work in art supply stores. He worked first with David Davis, and then he worked for Torch, one of those - not in existence anymore. And I used to always go and buy materials from him because he was the most knowledgeable person about paper, paint, whatever, linen. And his sister also worked in one of those - in David Davis. She runs his business now. And one day I went in there and I said, "I'm going to Paris." And he said, "Oh," he said, "well, look up a friend, somebody I think you might like." And he hands me a piece of paper with her phone number on it and her name. And I look at, and I said, "You don't mean Joan Mitchell?" He says, "Yes." I said, "The Joan Mitchell?" [Laughs.] He said, "Yes, I think you would like each other."

And I was so excited when we went to Paris -

MS. RICHARDS: What year was this?

MS. FISHMAN: It was before he was making paint, so it was a long time ago now, in the late '70s, no, early '80s. No, it was late '80s, I'm sorry, because I had met her just a few years before she died, I think.

Anyway, we went - and we first went to Brussels [Belgium] and Amsterdam [Netherlands], and then we went down to Paris. We stayed in a little hotel. My mother and father were there. They were staying there for a couple of weeks. Betsy's daughter was living there. So we were visiting and looking at art. And we were there for a week and - for five days or something, and towards the end of it, I had this name and phone number. And I just couldn't do it. And I ended up sending her a postcard, like a couple of days before I was going to leave. I thought, I'll do it because I have to do it, but I was too intimidated. That night or the next night, midnight, there's a phone call in the hotel room. I get the phone. It's Joan Mitchell, drunk. Wow, okay. "I looked you up. My dear, I checked you out. Looks like you're a pretty good painter. How about we meet tomorrow?" And [laughs] she said, "I'm meeting my dealer near my gallery; why don't you meet us at this restaurant?"

And I said, okay. And I had no clothing - I was just wearing sneakers and dungarees. I was really intimidated about it. And I went, thinking, oh, I should wear some decent clothes. I don't have decent clothes. I walk in. She gets up. She's wearing dungarees and sneakers. I thought, ah, thank God, I'm in the right place. And she was extremely generous to me and kind. She introduced me to this French dealer, and she introduced me to -

MS. RICHARDS: Do you know his name?

MS. FISHMAN: - oh, it's - oh, I can't remember his name now, but -

MS. RICHARDS: Well, don't worry.

MS. FISHMAN: - but he was her dealer for many years. And there was an art historian there. And they were speaking French, and they wouldn't speak English. And she kept saying, "Come on, boys, you know she can't speak French. Don't be so stupid. Speak English." And they refused. And she was really annoyed at them. And she was so nice to me. She said, "These boys, they don't know what they're doing. They're just so protective over their language" - or whatever. And then she said, "Well, I have to go to the train. Come with me. Come with me to the train station." And we went. She said, "I always buy chocolates." There was a chocolate store at the train station. And she had me sit on the train with her. And I was afraid - I'm not a great traveler. I was afraid, oh, the train's going to go off, and I'm not going to [laughs] -

MS. RICHARDS: Getting lost, you don't know where you are.

MS. FISHMAN: - I'll be with Joan Mitchell on the way to her place, Vétheuil. And anyway, it was fine. And she said, "Come tomorrow for lunch with your friend."

So she had a car meet us at the train station, and we went to her house.

MS. RICHARDS: You took the train out to the country.

MS. FISHMAN: The next day. And she knew that I didn't drink then, at all. I was macrobiotic. I was vegetarian. And she was so kind about it. She had another drink for me. She had her assistant make me a vegetarian meal, which I found out was just unheard of. And we had a nice talk until she started drinking. And then what she did is she lit into Betsy. And she found out that Betsy had gone to Vassar [College, Poughkeepsie, NY], and then she started making fun of her. She was very nasty when she drank. And it's like this whole other side came up. She wanted to know what we did in bed. We were the wrong people to engage in that way. We were just like - the last thing we were going to do is talk about anything like that. And it made us angry. But she kept referring to Betsy as Vassar. "Okay, Vassar." But then she took us to her studio. And it was a great treat.

She kept bringing out more and more. "Here's what I worked on. I finished this one." I said, "Slow down, slow down, Joan." She didn't give me a chance to look. She had the speed and, kind of, I'll show you this, I'll show you that. It was a great visit, but it was unfortunate that she was drinking. And we became good friends.

I found out later - she told me that after she met me, she thought I was going to save her life.

MS. RICHARDS: In what way?

MS. FISHMAN: She thought I was like someone who was coming to make her happy again, to - she didn't explain it, but I sort of understood it. I think she was unhappy and isolated and really drinking a lot and lonely and really kind of stuck in Europe.

MS. RICHARDS: Would she be thinking about returning?

MS. FISHMAN: I don't have a clue. I don't know that she could have returned. But I think she would have - she was thinking that I was going to guide her in some way. I don't think she was happy. She was -

MS. RICHARDS: Guide her as - you, as a painter?

MS. FISHMAN: No, I don't think so, although she had a lot of respect for me. She thought I was a good artist. I didn't really question her about it.

MS. RICHARDS: Did she correspond with you after you'd come back to -

MS. FISHMAN: Yes, every time she came, she called, and we had some visits. She actually - she asked if she could come to the studio. And I said yes. And she brought like seven people with her. And I knew -

MS. RICHARDS: A kind of an entourage?

MS. FISHMAN: She had an entourage, people that were, like, totally enamored with her, artists. And they came into my studio, and I was pissed. And I don't let people do that. And - but I was trying to be patient with her. And then they started being critical because they were, like, competing with each other for Joan's attention, and they were trying to say things that she would respond to. And I just said, "This is my studio, and if you don't shut up, you're going to have to leave." And they all got very quiet, and Joan went, "Ohh." And that was the end of it.

But it wasn't about my work. It was like an excuse to perform for her. It was just very obvious.

MS. RICHARDS: Did she apologize for them, or did she apologize for herself bringing these people?

MS. FISHMAN: No, but I think she understood that I was not to be fooled around with. And I think she - I know she respected me. She was too far gone, you know, for me - she was too much of a drunk. I couldn't handle it. And I was still friends, until one thing happened. And I watched her do terrible things to people. I watched her reduce Rob Storr [artist, curator, and critic Robert Storr] to tears.

MS. RICHARDS: On the basis of his writing or his art?

MS. FISHMAN: Well, she was talking about women in MoMA like -

MS. RICHARDS: That's an easy place to attack him.

MS. FISHMAN: - yes. Well, I mean -

MS. RICHARDS: It's very attackable.

MS. FISHMAN: - yeah, yeah, yeah. And his lack of originality and whatever. But she reduced him to tears. It was a party at [Robert] Miller's house after an opening of hers. And all the art dinners were there. And I didn't know what happened, but that's what happened. She was really abusive.

But what happened to really - to make me stop the friendship, and I just didn't pursue it anymore. What happened is I was with Lennon Weinberg [Gallery]. She had convinced me to go with Lennon Weinberg. The reason she did that was she was [with] Miller [Robert Miller Gallery]. [Xavier] Fourcade [Gallery] had closed. Fourcade's lover had been Bernard Lennon. And Bernard Lennon and Jill Weinberg, who was the director - she was not the director of Fourcade. She was like an assistant - office assistant or something like that. He inherited a lot of the paintings and some money -

MS. RICHARDS: From Fourcade.

MS. FISHMAN: - and he opened this gallery, and they were starting this new gallery. And I hadn't left - I guess Baskerville & Watson [Gallery] had closed. And I was -no, I'd already been with Oscarson Hood [Gallery], and I was unhappy with them, and I left them. And I was looking for a gallery. I was living upstate. And Joan said, "You should go with these people. They're very good. I know them. They're terrific. And it would be good to give them a nice push and go with them before they open their gallery." And I said, "Why don't you go with them?" She was with Miller. And she said, "Well, I'm already with Miller," and they hadn't done anything, "and it's too late, but you could do it."

And I ended up going with - not because of that, but because, eventually, I liked Bernard Lennon a lot. I liked what he had to say, what his ambitions were. And so I showed with them. And she came into town one time, and we went to dinner. There was about six people at dinner, five people. It was - and Bernard Lennon and, probably, Jill and Joan, a couple of friends of hers.

And she - Bernard had AIDS. He died of AIDS, actually. We were sitting around the table, and she started talking about his AIDS. She said really nasty things about his illness. And I thought, that's it. She crossed the line. I never want to see her again.

MS. RICHARDS: How did he tolerate it?

MS. FISHMAN: He tolerated it because he knew her really well, how mean she could be, because he dealt with her all those years at Fourcade. And he really liked her. I think he probably loved her. You know, and it was something she did. She just said whatever she wanted to. But that wasn't okay with me. It was really nasty. And that was it.

MS. RICHARDS: A few questions more about the working methods. At one point, you introduced the palette knife and other tools, not using, or partially not using, the brush. What precipitated that change?

MS. FISHMAN: I started using the palette knife when I started working on those circle paintings and the wood paintings, those cut-wood paintings, because I really thought about how I was working as a kind of - of using paint as sculpture, as a sculptural material. And I really loved that - that working with Plasteline and wet clay. And the monochromatic nature of those paintings, the wood paintings, was like a Plasteline. And so I was putting it around like it wasn't paint, but rather some kind of sculptural material, a more physical, monochromatic material. And that reflected light off of itself only because - or it didn't - it had a lot of wax in it. It had a lot of wax. So that's how it started.

I started working on the Masonite because I liked to feel the knife against the Masonite, and being able to put the paint on it, again, it was - I didn't use wax in there, but it was really like adding material to the Masonite.

And then, when I first started making these paintings, I had been to Europe for the first time - second time, but

the first time that I actually got to look at a lot of paintings. Went to Italy and just looked at a lot of paintings that I had only seen in reproduction before.

MS. RICHARDS: That was in the '70s?

MS. FISHMAN: It was in '79. And I had only been working - from '77 to '79, I was working on this - paper and then the stretched-canvas pieces, those early canvas pieces. And when I came back, it was when I started introducing the brush again and a mark that was less geometric - I mean, a format that was less geometric, that had more to do with the movement of the arm. And it was because of those paintings in Europe, I thought, I can't deal with the edge like - the mark like this. This is about the hand and arm. It's about the body.

The person I like fixed on was someone I hadn't expected to be so interested in, was Duccio [di Buoninsegna] in Siena [Italy] and those - the Maestà series. And I became so interested in that tiny scale. They aren't that tiny, but I thought of them as being much smaller than they actually are. But the idea - what interested me about those paintings in that period - the Giotto's and before the Masaccio's - is the kind of naiveness about how to make something look real that - the attempt to look at something for the first time, instead of symbolizing it. It's like getting away from the gold leaf and whatever. But - like look at the hands; look how lovely that is, how - not naïve exactly, but so moving. It's such a - like - I don't know if I even have the words for it really, but such a super-sensitive connection to the parts of the body and the feeling of the face and the eyes.

And I started thinking about, like, I don't have a narrative in my painting, but this narrative is so interesting. And it's a passion. The passion, there's the passion. And so when I came back, I introduced the brush, and I introduced - I very slowly introduced the brush, but I also introduced an irregular mark, a curved line.

Yeah, that - looking at Italian painting had a lot of carryover for me. And I didn't go back again until - have I been back to Italy? I don't think I'd been back a second time. I've been to Europe, but I don't think I'd been back to Italy. It's like - oh, yes, I went back once with some friends, and we stayed not too far from Siena, but it wasn't a real big art trip. It was really about - a friend of mine - my friend Bianca rented a house in a little town where she owned a building once, and had lived. So we were really getting a feeling of these little towns. And she was taking us into these monasteries. And it was really about the life and the culture more than it was about painting.

I haven't really been back, but a lot stayed with me.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it around the same time that your interest in Chinese art and Buddhist practice came up in the late '70s, or was that - and scholars' rocks?

MS. FISHMAN: The scholars' rocks were a little later.

MS. RICHARDS: But the calligraphy and Chinese painting?

MS. FISHMAN: Oh, that came - that was - I was copying calligraphy on my own, just drawing from it. There was a book that this Chinese woman had given to me, very classy Chinese woman, had no money, but her father had been some fancy person in China. Whenever we went into a Chinese restaurant, everyone would come out and bow down to her. I thought, who is this?

MS. RICHARDS: Where did you know her from?

MS. FISHMAN: Well, she was a lover of this architect that I was with. And then when that relationship was over, I actually was with this Chinese woman briefly. And she kept buying me presents. And one of the presents was this book on a particular kind of Chinese calligraphy, which to this day has been interesting to me. And I copied those letters and did lots of drawings from them. And then later, much later - that was in the '70s - I didn't tie it in with anything else. It was just something that interested me a lot.

I - sometime in the '80s, I came across a review of a show at China Institute [New York City]. It was on scholars' rocks, and I had no idea what they were, but it was interesting to me, the idea of rocks. And so I went to see it, and I was knocked over by it. And I bought the catalogue, and that was the beginning. And I just was fascinated. I'd never seen anything like it. And they are just extraordinarily beautiful.

And it just hit some special note in me. And a couple of years later, I used to draw them and had cut up pictures of them. I had them on the walls. I read as much as I could. There wasn't that much written about them. And then I met Robert Rosenblum [sic], who has since died, but who had the largest single collection of scholars' rocks, probably anywhere. He was a sculptor who didn't have any money, and his aunt died and left him a fortune. And so he collected. He went all over China -

MS. RICHARDS: This is not the art historian Robert Rosenblum.

MS. FISHMAN: - no, his name might have been Richard Rosenblum, actually. I'm thinking I got this confused.

And he - I went to Boston to visit a friend, and I called him, and he invited me to come and see his collection. And I asked him if there was anyplace that you could get a rock or how expensive were they. And he said, "Well, I'll give you the name of this guy." He had a - he sold rocks to collectors and to dealers, mostly to dealers. And he said, "Give him my name; here's his." And he was in an antique mall, a flea market kind of a place. So I went and introduced myself and I got like a rock for \$100, my first rock, or \$60 or - and then I started - I bought a Lohan [Buddhist who has attained nirvana], a head of a Lohan. I bought - then he would give me things; some of the things ended up being very valuable. I don't think he had a clue, but he -

MS. RICHARDS: The dealer?

MS. FISHMAN: - yes, he had - he was just a middleman, kind of. He had a relative in some place in China. And there were a lot of people in China selling their rocks and their collections because they wanted to leave. And they were coming out of the country illegally, I think. And he was selling them to dealers, to Chinese dealers. And he had incredible stuff, most of which I couldn't go near. But then there were things that I was able to afford. And I sold a few paintings, and I was able to get a few rocks. And then I traded paintings for a rock here and there.

And so - actually next door, I have a little piece of my collection. And then at my apartment I have the rest of it. It's not a big - but I have many beautiful rocks.

And in the beginning I just was - just, like, volumes into my work from them. And the theoretical stuff, the philosophical stuff about them was perfect. It's about this tradition of someone - a diver or going into a lake - do you know about this?

A diver went into one of the sacred lakes - different rocks come from different sacred lakes. And so they would dive down and find rocks that had certain qualities to them that either looked like a mountain or looked like a dragon or looked like a figure or something, but had certain esthetic components, concavities and holes and masses and whatever. And then he cut them loose, bring them back up.

And I found out later, they had stone carvers that would chisel into them just to emphasize certain valuable aspects of them. And they put them into water for a couple of years so that the water would - to get rid of most of the marks, but they could see them microscopically. They found out later. I didn't know. A couple of years after I started looking at them, they had discovered that they were actually manipulated, so it was art, you know?

There was a formal language for abstraction that had never existed anywhere that was so marvelous for me to look at - weight and balance and how things work. And I loved it, and I love the - anyway, the whole idea of, like, harvesting rocks out of a water, like the unconscious, and all this stuff, and bring it up and working on it, put it down in the water again, and up again; it has so much richness to it.

I don't buy those anymore. I don't have any more room. I have a tiny little apartment. And I've looked at them a lot. I still am interested. They're still fascinating to me.

And I was meditating at the time. When I first - when Nancy decided that she was going to give me a show, and I had to do the work for the show, I was in a panic. First of all, Esther and I split up. I was by myself there. I was teaching for the first time out on Staten Island [NY]. I was - I just felt like I couldn't handle it. I was terribly depressed and morose and whatever. And I learned TM [Transcendental Meditation], and that got me through the whole period. I got up, first thing in the morning meditated, meditated before dinner. And so, okay, everything was fine. And I did that for 20 years. And then after this fire in my studio up in the country, I realized I didn't have any spiritual guidance at all. That meditation was just practical. And so I became involved in a Buddhist practice.

MS. RICHARDS: Why did the fire precipitate that?

MS. FISHMAN: Because I lost my bearings completely. I sort of had a nervous breakdown.

MS. RICHARDS: You felt that wouldn't have happened if the meditation -

MS. FISHMAN: I know I would have fallen apart, but I would have had something to go to. And that TM was just like a way of calming myself down and centering myself. But I needed, really, a lot of other things. I needed a real education in this, you know, about life, and that was a very good one. So I started going on retreats. And so it really - I think a lot of artists have done that, because it's a very dicey life. I mean, all of our lives are dicey. But I think making art and trying to survive emotionally, the people, the world, and your work, all of that is - and we tend - I think probably most of the artists tend to be - to have their own fragility that's - I don't know if it's

more than other people, but I know that there is a fragility in there. And you have to keep a balance of - one has to keep a balance of the unsettled stuff. It has to be there. You can't fix it. It's just what it is.

You know, the balance, I don't mean - imbalance isn't exactly it, but in a way it is. It's like the thing that's always not right that you're working off of. Maybe I'm -

MS. RICHARDS: You mean that's feeding your-

MS. FISHMAN: Feeding the work. It's like the thing that you always have to figure something out about it or - and that's the source for the work, is not knowing, is really not knowing, and to be able to live with that and to keep that, not solve problems. It's not about solving problems. It's about just working with nothing. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: I'm afraid my next question will be much more mundane. As you were painting through the '80s, you work - you had a residency at the MacDowell Colony [Peterborough, NH], and you painted small paintings there, I think.

MS. FISHMAN: It was right after the Italian trip, and what I did is I made these very small canvases. I think had 10 little canvases there, about this big, this big, looking to see if -

MS. RICHARDS: Like 12 by 12.

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah. Or actually, no squares, I don't think, but small, very small, eight by 10. And I borrowed Betsy's little VW [Volkswagen car] and put all these - I thought, how can I do this and get these paintings back? They'll be real small. And, well, I thought, well, the Duccios are really small; who cares? So I took these canvases up and a bunch of paper, and I painted these little paintings. And I loved them. And I showed them in New York. And I did lots of drawings for them and from them. Then I worked really hard. I was only there five weeks, but it was very productive.

MS. RICHARDS: There's a series of paintings whose the titles are interesting to me. In 1978, Ashkenazi, then, Golem, Tabernacle, Catherine Wheel. There's something similar, at least in the titles, that points to some part of which you're thinking about.

MS. FISHMAN: Well, for some reason, in the late '70s, yes -

MS. RICHARDS: Or early '80s.

MS. FISHMAN: - yeah, but it started in the late '70s, I believe.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, yes, yes, Ashkenazi was '78, but Golem was '81.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes. I just started reading about being a Jew. I started reading *Souls on Fire* [Elie Weisel. New York: Random House, 1972] and a lot of stuff about the great teachers and folk tales and history. And I was very curious about why I had never learned anything about Judaism, and knowing that my father had this background, and I know I never got it. And I felt like I was very lacking, like I didn't have any - I didn't know what it was to be a Jew. So I did a lot of reading and then I started titling my paintings things that had come up in the reading.

MS. RICHARDS: Titles came after you did the painting.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes, pretty much. Yes. And Catherine Wheel was a little different because Catherine Wheel - when I was with Bertha Harris, her book, *Lover* [New York: New York University Press, 1976], was introduced - she knew - she was a very smart woman, very educated woman, and she introduced me to the stories of the saints. And each one of the chapters in her book all started with a martyrdom, like a couple of sentences about a particular martyrdom. And the Catherine wheel, I didn't even know what that was until she started talking about it.

So I made this painting. It was like a Catherine wheel. She was, you know [laughs] - so yes, and I didn't do much more than title the paintings, but I was very wrapped up in who I was, what it meant to be a Jew, and what this tradition was. And then later ended up going to Auschwitz [concentration camp, Poland] -

MS. RICHARDS: I know. I want to get to that in a minute. You were also painting layering and veiling and - you had completely stopped, as you said before, the scraping, and you were using brush again, I think. And the color was very intense, like *Grand Slam* [1985], *Cinnabar and Malachite* [1986], in the mid-'80s. There is a lot of green and then -

MS. FISHMAN: Red.

MS. RICHARDS: Red and yellow and black, it was kind of a palette. Of course, the palette has changed all through the years, but there's a certain intensity to the colors and a kind of a - and I was wondering how you come to determine what colors you're going to use, if you sense that there is a kind of Louise Fishman palette or sensibility, or if there has been, and it's evolved?

MS. FISHMAN: You know, I think people identify certain things about my work, the color ideas. I think in those periods, those early paintings, it was pretty high contrast, high hue contrast and value contrast, and I didn't really understand about color. I - my color - what I learned about color, really, was only with Karl Sherman, in his color and design class, when I was looking at red, yellow, and blue in the in the Mondrians and Soutines. And that was Jewish, to me. A Russian Jew painting. He was painting the blood of the chicken or - it was a - it wasn't that it was literal, but it almost was literal. The color took on a physicality about - like, identified as with a thing, a red nose or red cheeks or this red gown or the veins in the drawing of veins of the hand and so on.

So it was literal in the way that you can be literal - the Fishman side of my family, the butchers, and- so that color. And I think looking at Italian paintings, then I started to think about color in a different way. I mean, Franz Kline was perfect for me, black and white. That's all I needed. And I think I thought in, sort of, sculptural forms, sculptural ideas, so that the color was secondary. It's more about value and intensity. And so it's just - I think the color has developed, changed, maybe become more sophisticated. I'm not sure that is exactly the right way to describe it. But the color is more about - it's a deeper understanding of light and the changing light. I don't really have words for the color, but I know it's developed on its own. It's something I've allowed to happen, and encouraged, but I don't have a language for it.

I mean, I can talk about other formal things much more easily than about color. It's become more important. The way I choose color is really like, how I'm going to use this and this, that. A lot of colors sort of come together from one painting to another. And it's just like a buildup. It's almost like adding clay, and it keeps changing. The color keeps changing. And - but I'm not relying on that black and white or that value structure the way I used to and the color was really just an addendum. The color is more on its own, or the hues are more complicated. There's more complex meaning in them in the way they interact with the whole. They are taking more of a place. They have their own identity.

MS. RICHARDS: And in the body of work you did in the late '80s, after you took the trip which I'm going to talk about, to Eastern Europe, the color shifted again. How did that trip come about? How did you meet Frank and Valerie Furth? I know you went with Valerie.

MS. FISHMAN: Well, I had a show at Baskerville & Watson, and Simon [Watson] said to me, "There are these collectors that want to meet you." And I - he said, "I rarely do this, but I think you really should meet them, meet Valerie." And so I said, okay. And so she came to meet me at the gallery. And she walked over to one painting, and she said, "That reminds me of Auschwitz, the gate at Auschwitz." And I thought, oh, my God. It made sense to me. I mean, I thought all this stuff I've been doing is so abstract, and it's all been, like in a way, I've educated myself as a Jew on my own [laughs] in this very independent way, trying to figure out what it is that I - who I am, what it means.

I did a lot of reading about the Holocaust, like every other Jew who's - every other Jew, period, but particularly one born in 1939, living through the war as a young, very young person. And she said - and she bought a painting, not that one. She bought another painting. And we became friends. She invited me to talks that she gave. She was an artist. She is an artist. I've lost touch with her, and I feel very bad about that.

MS. RICHARDS: I thought she passed away.

MS. FISHMAN: Valerie Furth?

MS. RICHARDS: I know her husband did.

MS. FISHMAN: Really.

MS. RICHARDS: I'm not positive.

MS. FISHMAN: Do you know that he died?

MS. RICHARDS: I'm not positive. I just have [a memory] that one of them had died.

MS. FISHMAN: I didn't have a falling out - when Betsy and I broke up, everything was very hard, everything I did. And she [Valerie] had had a stroke, and I was - and it was very hard for me to see her like that. And she and her husband, who wasn't well - neither of them were in a very good shape.

MS. RICHARDS: Maybe I'm thinking of that stroke she had, Valerie.

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah. I don't really know. And the one person who was a tie to them is John Sacchi, who's this collector.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you spell Sacchi?

MS. FISHMAN: S-A-C-C-H-I, I think that's how it's spelled. He was a collector of mine. He's still a collector of mine and a friend then. And when I left Miller, Miller told him something about me, and he decided I was no longer a friend. And he would never speak to me again. And he was a hairdresser for Valerie. She had cancer when she was younger, and he made - he would go to her house and work on her. And I went to lectures that she gave with him. And that was the end of it. So he's the only tie I had. And it's been so long that I'm embarrassed now, and I'm afraid to find out. You know, she was not young.

It's one of the great regrets that I have, that I stopped seeing them.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, how did that trip come to be?

MS. FISHMAN: Well, I'd known her in different ways. And she came to the studio one time to see my new paintings. And we had lunch. And she - at lunch, she showed me these pamphlets on this trip. She said, "I'm going to Auschwitz again." She said, "They've been asking me for years." This was the -

MS. RICHARDS: They, who?

[END CD 5.]

This is Judith Richards interviewing Louise Fishman on December 21, 2009, in Chelsea, 526 West 26th, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc six.

So you were talking - she was talking about the Simon Wiesenthal Foundation wanting her to go.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes, every year they have - they sponsor a trip to Eastern Europe to Terezin, Auschwitz, and to the Jewish communities in Budapest [Hungary], Prague [Czech Republic], and Warsaw [Poland]. And she started talking about this trip. And she's just talking about how frightened she was about going.

MS. RICHARDS: She had been before?

MS. FISHMAN: Only as- during the war, as a survivor.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, so that's why she's frightened.

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah. And she said, "I no longer have nightmares, and I'm terrified that I'm going to have nightmares again. And I'm terrified about going back, but I finally decided that I need to go. And my husband is going, but he was sort of hopeless because he had" - they're both from Hungary, and he had been sent to Boston [MA] to a cousin to pursue studies in architecture because - Jews were no longer allowed to do higher education. So he was sent away. And while he was sent away, his parents died in Auschwitz. And he had a huge amount of guilt and rage, and he was going with her. And he was in worse shape than she was about going.

And I said - I said, "Valerie, is it too late for me to go? I can go and kind of be there. I'd love to go. I've always been very curious about those places. Maybe I can be useful in some way, sort of a third person along to talk to." And she said, "Oh, were you interested in going? Absolutely, it's not too late. You have to get a visa." You blah, blah, blah. So I signed up. I had a little money. I had sold some paintings, and I went.

And we -

MS. RICHARDS: Betsy didn't go with you?

MS. FISHMAN: No. Went by myself. I had to do a very heavy immersion in Holocaust literature before I left. They had a reading list. And the only thing Betsy said is, "Take this camera with you, and here is a tripod." It was a little tiny tripod that I could put on a table. She said, "You have to take photographs."

[Phone rings.]

I'm not going to take this, whatever it is, but I can't turn it off until it stops ringing.

So I went, thinking of myself as an observer. And I got there and I was like I was a survivor. It was a terrifying trip for me. I was stunned. I was terrified. I - first of all, I wore a Jewish star and -

MS. RICHARDS: You didn't usually do that.

MS. FISHMAN: No. Well, no I didn't. And -

[Phone rings.]

I just turned it off. Is it just telling me I have a message?

So we got to Warsaw. That was our first stop. And there was really like a bustling hostility towards Jews. You could feel it everywhere. And I was in an elevator once, going up to my room. And I was wearing this Jewish star. And they were just looking at me. And it was really intense. I never have felt like that before. And it was odd. I felt like, wow, this is - I hadn't realized it was still so blatant. And it was blatant in every country that we went to.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think if you hadn't been wearing - showing - the Jewish star, it might have been different?

MS. FISHMAN: I think they knew I was a Jew. They can smell Jews, those folks. And it was pretty awful in a lot of ways, plus it was a Soviet country then; all of them were suffering from poverty and hunger. There were bread lines and severe cold.

And then we went to Auschwitz. And I trembled. It was in April. I remember trembling. It was cold, but I was trembling to be there. It was so disturbing. And I just kept taking pictures. I saw the whole thing through this camera lens. And I remember just trembling. It was awful. And I - I don't know. I was stunned.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you end up being helpful to the Furths?

MS. FISHMAN: I was there. I don't think they - they took me to dinner in Hungary, in Budapest. They took me to a gypsy restaurant. And they had this gypsy band playing songs that they used to listen to when they were young. They didn't get - they weren't married in Hungary. They were married in New York. They met in New York. But they were just the most charming people. And I remember there was a little pitcher of goose fat on the table. [Laughs.] Food in Budapest was wonderful. The other countries were horrible.

And that was the highlight. Budapest was easy compared to the others. There was a real hardness.

MS. RICHARDS: Prague was difficult, too?

MS. FISHMAN: Prague was dark and cold. And it was absolutely beautiful. It was Terezin, and it was such a tiny Jewish community that was there, the synagogue, the little tiny number - there was one - I think when I was in Budapest, there was one - the first bar mitzvah bucher was coming through. I think he came from Boston and New York. And he was coming to be bar mitzvahed in that synagogue with a head of a small school. And it was like a miracle. And it was so many years later. And they still, because of the Soviet, it was illegal for them to have Jewish books. So - and we smuggled - I didn't, but people in the group smuggled some material to them. We met members of the Jewish community and talked.

I was just stunned by how bad it was. And I was - the exhibits at Auschwitz and being at Auschwitz - there's no way to explain it. I kept thinking, I'm not a survivor. I didn't live here. And I couldn't - I was just holding myself together. And when I got back - and I had gone into that pond, and I took ashes - I came back, and I was in the streets of New York. And if anybody bumped into me, I was ready to fight. And I was in such a rage, I thought, I can't stay in this city. I can't be here. I'm out of control. So we went up to the country and stayed.

And I went into my studio, and I was doing paintings that were so horrible. They just felt like - I taught a long time, and I knew when a student was really troubled, like imbalanced. And I was doing paintings that looked like a crazy person. And I thought, I'm not doing this. I can't - I'm not going to do it.

And it wasn't until my friend Bertha Harris said, "Use these ashes - don't plant a tree, Louise, use these ashes to make paintings with." And everybody helped.

Carl Plansky brought over beeswax and a mortar and pestle. And I ground these ashes and these pebbles and whatever it was that was in this sludge in the beeswax, and I decided I would make paintings. I made a couple of containers.

MS. RICHARDS: A few ounces?

MS. FISHMAN: Yes, felt like I had my survivors in that room. I had those - "my Jews" were with me. There was history in my studio. And there was a reason to do - there was some reason - I don't exactly know what the reason was, but it felt like, okay, now, I can do something.

And I - you probably read about what I did, but I eliminated every kind of superfluous mark, attitude, and I decided I had to just figure out how to make painting be really essential and unpretentious. And that had nothing to do with my career, the tradition of painting. It was just about this material and this color and this

canvas and simple, just to work. And it was a very good experience.

And if Simon Watson hadn't come up to visit me in the country, they never would have been shown, those paintings, because I wasn't at all thinking about showing them. And he wasn't representing artists then. He was only showing political stuff. And he looked at them, and he said, "Louise, you must show these. We have to do a show." I said, "Well, you know, I wasn't really thinking of showing these, and it's sort of pretentious to show these paintings. I don't want to use them, use this experience." And he said, "No, I think they need to be seen."

And so I thought about it. And we decided to do a show. And then I decided not to talk about that part of the paintings. And I entitled them with Passover titles, because it was about that freedom, a celebration of freedom. And then I did show the photographs, which Betsy printed for me. She commented that working in the darkroom and watching these images come up was like being with me in Auschwitz, because they were so raw and brutal, in a way. So she collaborated with me. She's a great photographer, Betsy.

And anyway, I showed those photographs in a book and the paintings. And then one night, Valerie and I spoke together about going there, and her work, and my work and -

MS. RICHARDS: Did you need to share these thoughts or the images or the works with the foundation that had supported the trip?

MS. FISHMAN: No, but I didn't - I thanked them in the book. I found out later, actually, through - somebody signed the book - the Orthodox Jews believe that the ashes should not be moved from Auschwitz. Did you know that? And - I didn't. And someone signed it and said, "This is sacrilegious, or something." Really? I said, well, I wanted my Jews out of there. It was really crude and simple. I wanted -

MS. RICHARDS: To take them away.

MS. FISHMAN: Take them away. And so I thought about it, and I thought, you know - well, it's too late. I did it. And I don't know how I would have thought if I knew. It was just an impulse. And it wasn't - I didn't think about it. I just took it, and that was it. So -

MS. RICHARDS: Those paintings were titled, as you said, after you did them. You decided to use these titles that had to do with Passover. And we talked about titling before, briefly. Is that still consistently true, that after you do the paintings, you then assign the titles?

MS. FISHMAN: There've been occasions when a painting - the title would just come up as I'm working, but a lot of times, I sit with it and sit with it until something -

MS. RICHARDS: And what function would you say the titles are supposed to play, or do you want them to play?

MS. FISHMAN: - the first thing is there's a naming process. It's like, this is that, instead of a number of other things, because it's really - there's a lot of complexity in the work, and it's like a little bit of a handle on an idea about what the painting is. It's just as abstract as everything else I do. But, like, somebody had a birthday party, a poet friend, and for his birthday, we all gave him presents. And he took a little paperback of Emily Dickinson and tore out pages and gave everybody a poem. And so he gave me this page. And I - there was a title on each side of the page. One of the paintings I titled My Final Inch. And the other one was Loose the Flood [2009]. They were just perfect. I was like, oh, yes, Loose the Flood.

So this is unusual, but I often read poetry when I'm working, and the titles just - oh, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: I see right now you're working on more than one painting at once. Is that usual? That has always been the case?

MS. FISHMAN: It has been maybe always, but particularly for the last - I don't know - 10 years. I seem to start a group of them and go back and forth for a while. And then usually one painting becomes prominent in my mind, and then I often put the others away for a while or stop working on them. Sometimes I have to put them away so I don't look at them much. And I continue working on one. And then I need a break. I bring another one out, and I go back and forth a little bit until - yes, so there is a kind of - a little bit of a dialogue between them.

MS. RICHARDS: Yet each one turns out to be very distinctly individual.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes, but during the course of it, sometimes they are more similar than not, although they're already pretty distinctive. And this is not that far along.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you prefer not to have earlier works around, visible, or do you prefer, in fact, to have access to, maybe, the paintings you did just before these?

MS. FISHMAN: I don't usually like to. That's a painting I did in the '80s at some point or - I think it was in the '80s, one of a group of pieces that I kind of liked, and I just put it up just to look at it. But I don't really keep those paintings around. Occasionally there's something. Right now, I moved everything out. Just these are all ready to go, pretty much. And a couple that are still unfinished. But I decided I needed to, like, quiet everything down.

MS. RICHARDS: Once you started painting, and you might have an idea of where it can go, but would you feel it's just not right, do you put it aside, or just keep working on it till it resolves itself?

MS. FISHMAN: Well, I don't think I really know where it's going.

MS. RICHARDS: It's not as if you're going to change direction to solve it. You don't know which direction it was -

MS. FISHMAN: No. I can see what's there. I can see some of what's there. And sometimes there's no way to get in. And I have to sit with it longer, or put it away and bring it out again. And then it becomes a little more obvious. Sometimes the painting's finished and I can't see it. And then I - if I look long enough and put it back and bring it out, yes, well, there's nothing more to be done. But a lot of times it's just hard to figure out how to reenter a painting. It's difficult. And it's very physical. I have to have energy. So it's like that, and also I don't know how to get back in.

So it's really just about the next movement. It's not about what it's going to be necessarily, although sometimes I think, well, maybe this will be it. But it really is about just one other thing, or like adding this mark, and that mark could change the whole thing, and it'd be totally different. But there's always - I'm always able to scrape down and repaint. And best thing about oil painting is there is a lot that you can continue to do, no matter what's happened.

Sometimes it gets very laden.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that where you might use accidents? I don't know if you'd consider anything an accident or a mistake that might lead you to a new way of approaching it.

MS. FISHMAN: They're all of the same caliber, in a way. They're all, like, potentially unknown things. There's certain things that I like that make a mark, think I'm doing the same thing I've done before, and then I realize - because the circumstances are always complicated because it's always different. If they're solvents or not, where it falls within a rectangle. There's - they are all potential for being just what they are, or they're all potentially accidents or incidents. They're all things that just happen. And as they happen, they interact with everything else. And sometimes they just feel too complex. I can't even begin to straighten out what it is that's going on.

MS. RICHARDS: If you're at that moment, then you stop working?

MS. FISHMAN: Yes - well, if it's overwhelming, I have to back off a little. And I also back off if I feel like I'm afraid to lose something because - there is a balance one has to have, I think, between - how do I say this - being able to permit what's there to happen and to not allow the obvious to just take over, that may -

MS. RICHARDS: To be too permissive.

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah, it's like being too permissive. It's like -

MS. RICHARDS: Indulgent.

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah, like, oh, anything you do is great. If you did it, it's terrific. And you get a certain skill level, and you do stuff, oh, yes, well, that's, so what is it? That's really the issue; like, is it important this way? Or if I just move this around a little bit, what is it that I have here? Is that - so it takes awhile because I, you know, there's so much I know, and then there's a whole lot I don't. And so there is a lot of discovery. And it takes time, and sometimes it's, like, all together. I don't know what happened, but it seems all together. I may not understand what I've done. Put it away. And I have finished paintings like that. And later can see, oh, it's much simpler than I thought, like I had no idea what I did.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you have the situation where you start a new painting out of white canvas and you're frozen; you have no idea what to do? Where to start?

MS. FISHMAN: No, that's easy for me, because I look the other way half the time - I just take - like I'll just take colors that are there, a glove, and a piece of paper towel, and make marks. Or it's really about stepping into the basketball court. It's I just go in there and throw the ball towards the basket and then step back. I could wipe it down. I could - but it just engages me.

What's hard is, after some interesting things happen, how to figure out the next place to go with it.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you find that this whole process, is in any way, getting easier over all the years?

MS. FISHMAN: Easier and harder. What's easier is my skill level. What's harder is to - skill is less and less useful in terms of what makes a good painting, for me, and probably for a lot of people, because it's not about making beautiful paintings. It's about something else. It's about making something that really has a life and has something that's inspiring. I don't really know how to talk about it exactly, but it's that. It's like, hey, yeah, well, it's rough, but it's so deep to me. One painting, Cooked and Burnt [2007], it was called, and I thought, that's really good. It is really - I'm happy I did that. It just felt - it had everything in it. It was not a beautiful painting. It was just so real somehow.

I think I said to John, or somebody came to my studio, and I said, "This is my late Titian" - because that's my inspiration. I must aim high, right?

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs] Fortunately, that would be a great place to stop, but unfortunately I have a few more things.

When you're working in your studio, do you usually have music or not?

MS. FISHMAN: Often, often I do. And there're periods I have to turn everything off, because it gets so subtle that I can't handle too many distractions.

MS. RICHARDS: Is it usually the same kind of music?

MS. FISHMAN: I listen to a lot of classical music. And it varies a lot. But what I tend to go back to is piano music, [Johann Sebastian] Bach, a lot of [Ludwig van] Beethoven, [Wolfgang Amadeus] Mozart, a lot of [Joseph] Haydn. And I listen to more modern music, [Olivier] Messiaen and, actually, a number of more contemporary composers. But I can't have anything too jarring at certain points when I'm working. There are times I just listen to - I could listen to some toccatas and fugues over and over again, just like, yes, I'm hearing that. There are times I listen to some opera - [inaudible] - I listen to a lot of requiems. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: What about the light? Do you try to maintain an even light? You have natural light. So that's going to imbalance it, depending on the time of day. Would you try to duplicate the light that your paintings would be exhibited under in a gallery?

MS. FISHMAN: I don't really think about it. I try - what I decided at a certain point is that my light is good enough. It's not perfect. It's okay. And I'm not going to get too picky.

MS. RICHARDS: It doesn't matter if it's changing during the day.

MS. FISHMAN: No, and it does change. And I like - I used to like it, and actually, my favorite time is, like, when the sun is going down. It's very quiet. The light is very quiet. It depends what time of year, but four o'clock, or now it's probably three o'clock. But when it just starts to go down, that's a really nice time. I like that. The light is a little more on angle, depending on what season it is. And then I like working at night.

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you about your routine. Have you always worked a certain period of time every day? You start in the morning, or you start in the afternoon.

MS. FISHMAN: I don't usually work in the morning. In a way, I - I mean, I do like - I do exercise. I like to meditate. I walk. I ice my knees. I do all this stuff. So it takes me awhile to get there, but I also realize I used - in a way, I'm a morning person. I have a lot of energy. My energy is a little too frantic in the morning, I think. What I've discovered is I need to quiet down, at least that's what I learned a little while ago, that when the light's a little quieter, when it's quiet outside, when I'm quieter, it feels like it's the time to paint.

MS. RICHARDS: So afternoon and the evening is the prime.

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah. So that's been the case for a while now. It used to be in the morning list, because I used to wake up like this. No more, I don't do that anymore. I stay up later at night. And I don't know if it's the best schedule for me, but that's what it is.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you feel about visitors - well, art visitors - seeing paintings before they're done? Do you try to keep people from seeing work that's in progress?

MS. FISHMAN: It depends what stages they're at. At this point - I've had a couple of days of not working, so that's okay. It's going to be brand new for me going back into them. But if I were like - if I had just been working a couple of hours ago, it wouldn't have been good to have somebody in here. So like, it was good to do it all at once, after the weekend.

MS. RICHARDS: This studio is separate from where you live. We were just speaking about your earlier studios. If I remember correctly, they were mostly where you lived. Have you preferred to have it where you live?

MS. FISHMAN: Well, I would actually prefer to be closer to my studio. I'd like to -

MS. RICHARDS: But not live in the same space as you're working.

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah, well, first of all, it's toxic.

MS. RICHARDS: All the oil.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes, I think ideally I'd like to have an apartment on one floor and a studio on another floor or a studio that is really separate, so it doesn't have those odors and those poisons coming in and out.

But I'm a little too far right now. It doesn't sound like it. But for me -

MS. RICHARDS: Three blocks.

MS. FISHMAN: No, it's more than three blocks. It's like Seventh and Eighth to 10th, between 10th and 11th. And it's over -

MS. RICHARDS: Three avenues and three streets.

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah, so for me, it was okay, but it's very hard for me to walk on concrete with these knees the way they are. And it gets worse. And especially he [dog] walks very slowly. He used to smell everything. So it's like - and I think that if I lived near where I worked, I would work in the evening. I'd have dinner. I eat - sometimes I eat at eight o'clock at night. But I think I would walk into my studio, and there would be more continuity. At least, that's what I think about now.

MS. RICHARDS: How long have you been in this studio here?

MS. FISHMAN: I lived at this place for 11 years, and I've been in this studio, or in this building, for more like 16 years, I think. I've been here almost since they opened to artists. The first floor was the ninth floor. And they were about to open the fifth floor. And that's when I found out about it. And I picked this space right away.

So I was really one of the first people here. And so it was a long time ago. It was when Betsy and I decided to move back from the country, and I thought I was going to have to go to Brooklyn to get a reasonable studio. We had an apartment, and I didn't have a studio. And I found out about this and I took it in 10 seconds. And I was commuting from the Upper West Side, which I did not like. But the studio was great.

And then, it felt good, because I was living with someone and I needed to have separate space, because we had actually lived in the same loft on 14th Street.

MS. RICHARDS: Where was that?

MS. FISHMAN: In the Meat Market, Ninth Avenue - between Ninth and 10th.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that where Bill Jensen lived?

MS. FISHMAN: Yes, it was the same building.

MS. RICHARDS: And that's when you're talking about the fire, or is that separate?

MS. FISHMAN: The fire was in Upstate New York, that is, at the firehouse; actually, that was the building that was my studio. It was a fire in that building, an all-frame building. And - but I was then living on 14th Street. Yes, that was it.

The studio was nice, but I hated living there. It's the smell of meat. The building was - there was no sun; there was no air. I - no way to live.

I had used it just as a studio, and we were living in Brooklyn Heights. Betsy raised her kids there. And they all started going to college, and she said, "I want live in Manhattan." So suddenly, we were living on 14th Street. It was plenty of space, but I just didn't like it.

I don't like when the air is fetid and it's like looking out at another - a brick wall, no light, no air.

MS. RICHARDS: Why did you pick it in the first space?

MS. FISHMAN: It was a good space. It's hard to find space. It was cheap. And it was in Manhattan.

MS. RICHARDS: Let's just go back to dealers, and then we'll go back to your work. Basically, what has been your approach to finding a dealer? You talked about actually bringing your slides to Paula Cooper. It seems like Nancy Hoffman - you weren't pursuing her - she -

MS. FISHMAN: She just came along.

MS. RICHARDS: - she came along. After that, you showed at Oscarson Hood [Gallery]. How did that -

MS. FISHMAN: Well, there was an interlude where Mary Boone was going to show my work.

MS. RICHARDS: - oh, yes, you were in a group show.

MS. FISHMAN: I was in a group show. But I had - talked with her, and I realized I couldn't work with her. And then she put my work in this show. And she hung my pieces in her office. And I took them out of the show. And that was the end of that.

MS. RICHARDS: What would you say you were looking for when you were looking for a gallery? Obviously, you didn't find it at Mary Boone.

MS. FISHMAN: I couldn't have somebody who was trying to control me. And she is very proud of that.

MS. RICHARDS: So you wanted the very hands-off -

MS. FISHMAN: I wanted - I needed room. I couldn't have somebody who had a complicated relationship with me. It had to be simple. I needed to like them. I needed to trust them. And - Oscarson Hood, that was really very temporary, in a way, because I thought it might be a little bit more than it ended up being. And I had some decent shows. And I always had a lot of people looking and reviews. I was very fortunate in that way.

MS. RICHARDS: And you've had shows very consistently throughout -

MS. FISHMAN: Every couple of years.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. FISHMAN: Just in New York.

MS. RICHARDS: And how did you then make the skip to Baskerville & Watson?

MS. FISHMAN: How did I go there?

MS. RICHARDS: Go from - yeah.

MS. FISHMAN: Well, I was with Oscarson Hood and I decided to leave. I just couldn't stand it there. It was a wrong place in a lot of ways. I was talking to Carolanne - no, I was talking to Lyn Blumenthal and Kate Horsfield from the Video Data Bank [Chicago, IL], and they said, "You know, there's this young guy named Simon Watson. And he has a gallery, is a young gallery. It's a small space. But he's very good, and he adores your work." And he said - they said, "We had a conversation with him." They said, "If you could have any artist in the city in your gallery, who would it be?" And he said, "Louise Fishman, hands down." I said, "Really?" And they said he would love to come to the studio. I said, "Well, I'll have him over."

So he came over. And we made a very, you know - we had a little show there, uptown, and the more I got to know them and their artists and Carolanne Klonarides, who was the director, the more I liked them. And it seemed like a terrific place. It was interesting because the context was good. It's like, all these artists they would bring from the East Village and -

MS. RICHARDS: It sounds like it was important to you - perhaps still important - to feel connected to the other artists in the gallery.

MS. FISHMAN: Well -

MS. RICHARDS: I don't know if that was the case from the very beginning. You talked about Paula Cooper; I don't know - about Nancy Hoffman, the other artists, the other galleries.

MS. FISHMAN: And that would be nice.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, ideal.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes, and it was true with Paula, certainly. But particularly Baskerville & Watson, when I think about it, what an interesting spread of people and interesting talent. I didn't get to know them very well, but I was very interested in who they were, all of them, and seeing the work. It was Tip Dunham, and the guy who made lamps -

MS. RICHARDS: R.M. Fischer?

MS. FISHMAN: Yes. It was Sherry Levine. It was - it was a whole slew of interesting people. I can't think of all them, but I remember just - oh, and Richard Prince was in that group.

MS. RICHARDS: Very interesting.

MS. FISHMAN: And yes, and me. And I was the only real painter-painter. I was doing traditional painting. I didn't understand what the connection was, but I liked it being in that context, because I think that I get misplaced a lot of times. People don't think of me as - they think of me as being very traditional. I think I'm really not, but I don't think - at least I think I'm not - some people think I'm not it. They see it, see the connection. And a lot of people just - one of the problems with Cheim & Read is they always link me to Joan Mitchell and Bill Jensen now, which I don't think - there are connections, but that's sort of a dead end in a way. It feels like it.

I love Joan's paintings, but it's a different tradition. And- who knows.

MS. RICHARDS: And then after that, you talked to Lennon Weinberg. Then you actually - you showed at Robert Miller for a few times.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes, several. I had like three or four shows there. And that was interesting. There were a lot of interesting artists there and estates that were wonderful, like Eva Hesse's two-dimensional work, and [Jean-Michel] Basquiat was there, and that sculptor who I like so much - sorry I can't think of the name. He's from - anyway, I can't think of his name - a number of interesting artists were at Miller.

MS. RICHARDS: Louise Bourgeois.

MS. FISHMAN: Well, yes, and Joan Mitchell and wonderful photographers. And I'm very interested in photography, so that was very exciting. My gallery really became more of a blue chip kind of a place. There's less of the kind of liveliness that was there. I love my gallery. I love John.

MS. RICHARDS: And so when John and Howard left Miller, they brought a number of artists, including you.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes, I had one last show with Miller, but I could see that - and Robert Miller was buying my big paintings. He really wanted to keep me. But I just knew it was not the right place anymore, that John was the connection. He was - I decided to go with them, even though they didn't even have a gallery. And I didn't know what they were going to do, but I thought, you know, Miller's just not going to be the place anymore for me. They have money, but that's not what I want. I would love to have money. And it's not easy. It's - I mean, I'm fine. I'm doing fine. I don't do really, really the way I would like to.

I would like to have less - like right now, I would like to not be quite as - I'm not worried about money. I never have worried so much. I've always managed to get by, and do better than get by. But I don't like this feeling - I don't have any other income but these painting sales. And I've got - now I have more obligations because I own this place upstate outright, but there're expenses. And I own an apartment. That's a co-op studio apartment. It's like - I have a car. I'm one person. So as far as everybody else in the world goes, I'm doing extraordinarily well. So I'm quite lucky.

MS. RICHARDS: And you've been showing at Cheim & Read since -

MS. FISHMAN: Since they opened.

MS. RICHARDS: - since they opened in 1998.

You showed me earlier that you have archives in the studio space next to this. Have you always felt you're responsible for keeping your own archives, even though you were represented by galleries?

MS. FISHMAN: No, no, I haven't. I've just had sort of a lot of work that never goes to galleries.

MS. RICHARDS: Works on paper mainly?

MS. FISHMAN: Works on paper, earlier paintings. Because of the interest in some of the earlier work, Cheim & Read now has a bunch of it. But there is - and then there's a lot of prints. There's a lot of drawings. There's a lot of irregular work. There are lots of papers, letters, journals.

MS. RICHARDS: You're collecting that now, or you're actually - you're organizing it?

MS. FISHMAN: Well, I have someone who's doing it.

MS. RICHARDS: Digitizing the slide images?

MS. FISHMAN: Well, she hasn't gotten there yet, but she's just putting all the stuff together, just taking care of it, wrapping everything carefully, and so that everything's preserved and not getting whatever it's not supposed to get on it. And organizing, it's general organizing. And then she will photograph stuff and scan, put everything like that in a program.

So - and John doesn't have an archivist, but he has a registrar. So they have their own - basically they have their own archives. And this is mine, and it will include what's at the gallery, but I think I really need that. I'm 70, so who knows? I think it's important to be responsible for - I have stuff - I don't want to leave this to somebody - I don't know who I would even leave it to, to take care of - but I don't want to - I just have this mysterious body of work that somebody has to go through.

I've left instructions for a foundation and a board, and very simple instructions, not very developed. But so I do want to have it organized. And I want to be able to get to things when I need to. It's like - like just the fact that I lost the Angry Paintings. It's like, I don't know where they are. And now I'm thinking I don't know where they are - any other stuff. People have bought stitched pieces and wood pieces. And I want to show '70s work someplace in the city. I'm looking for a -

MS. RICHARDS: It seems like something that Cheim & Read would show.

MS. FISHMAN: They don't really have - John wants me to do it, but he has too many artists. He doesn't have room. And I - in a way, it's a good opportunity, because I would like to have another situation. Have people go to another space to see my work. Because I tend to really only show there. Rare that I'm in a group show even -

MS. RICHARDS: You have had other shows in L.A. and San Francisco -

MS. FISHMAN: And Berlin [Germany].

MS. RICHARDS: Berlin.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes and I'm going to be showing in San Francisco in the fall. But the city - people in the city basically see me at Cheim & Read. And it's a good space for my work, but I would like to vary it. And a lot of people have never - have no knowledge of that work from the '70s.

MS. RICHARDS: Absolutely, yeah. Speaking of your career, you've had quite a bit of critical attention. But have there been critics who have really taken the wrong approach - whatever you think is the wrong approach to your work - and written about it in such a way that, at this moment, you'd like to correct the record, in a sense?

MS. FISHMAN: Well, a lot of people have referred to me, and actually, they think they're quoting me in saying that I'm a second-generation or third-generation Abstract Expressionist.

MS. RICHARDS: Right, I read that.

MS. FISHMAN: I never said that. Somebody else said it, and somebody quoted it. And it just got carried down.

MS. RICHARDS: It's good that we're doing this now, then.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes. And I never knew how to go about correcting that. But that's not true. I don't think of myself as an Abstract Expressionist. I think that I have roots there. I have roots in Cezanne. I think I have roots in a lot of places, in some shtetl in Russia. [Laughs.] So that's one thing that I - and there're times when people have talked about me as a woman artist. And that's not that common anymore, but trying to look at my work as a Jewish artist.

And I have shown it at Jewish Museum [New York, NY]. They have a lot of my work. And there's going to be a handful of paintings in a show there. I think it's next year.

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you about how much you have wanted to control the context that your work is seen in, in terms of thematic exhibitions, and how you felt about - it's been decades ago, but when your work was in exhibitions that were just women or just gay artists or just Jewish artists, how did you feel then, and did you have a say in the work being included? Have there been times when you have said, no, I refuse to have my work included?

MS. FISHMAN: I've never done that. I've never done that. I think - I don't know if it's a mistake or not, but I feel like I'm spread out in a lot of traditions and a lot of identities. And I don't think that my work will - I think my work is pretty strong. And I don't think it will get lost in any of those areas. I think it has - my career may have suffered from my emphasis on being a feminist, lesbian. I'm not sure. I'm not sure what's affected and clearly not affected my career, frankly.

I'm disappointed that I haven't had a museum show, as you were saying, that's with feminist artists in their 70s, or having a book on my work, which doesn't exist. And that would be nice. And I just hope it happens before I'm dead. That I can - I mean, I am pissed that the museums in New York, they really have not done - it's annoying to me that I -

MS. RICHARDS: You had work in a couple of Whitney Biennials, but they were very early on.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes. And they were good.

MS. RICHARDS: And the Carnegie International [Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA].

MS. FISHMAN: Yes, well he's been a real fan. That was this very, very -

MS. RICHARDS: Who curated the one you were in?

MS. FISHMAN: It was Richard Armstrong.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, yes.

MS. FISHMAN: And he's - yes, I know, he is the director of the [Peggy] Guggenheim [Collection, Venice, Italy]. He's a fan. I think he's a terrific curator.

Yeah, I really haven't been included in things. MoMA has done really nothing. If Elizabeth Murray hadn't included me in that show that she put together, I never would have had anything at MoMA. It's annoying. It doesn't take up a lot of my emotional space, but it's annoying.

MS. RICHARDS: Surprising, too.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes, I think - I think I'm being fairly objective. I think my work is good enough to at least - there's a lot of crap there. But that's always the case. Objectively speaking, there's always, you know, there's a lot of artists who never got into those big shows or those big museums. That's sort of historic. So - I don't like wasting a lot of time being annoyed. And it doesn't happen that much. Every once in a while I think, "What the fuck happened here?" How come I - how come this one - and you go into the book stores, and this one has a book and that one has a book. I don't have a book. I want a book. And I think, time to paint.

MS. RICHARDS: They happen in so many different ways.

MS. FISHMAN: Pardon?

MS. RICHARDS: Books happen in so many different ways.

MS. FISHMAN: Well, they get paid for a lot. There's a lot of vanity books. And I thought about it. A friend of mine was saying, you know, you really should do this. You should - here is this publisher. He'd do it in a second. What does it cost? Oh, it'll cost about \$70,000. Excuse me. [Laughs.] Well, you can raise it. I'm not a money raiser. I'm not going to go around and ask for people to support my book.

MS. RICHARDS: Pay for your own book.

MS. FISHMAN: I've published two little books - they cost us a couple of thousand dollars - that a friend of mine designed them for me and had - and published them digitally. And they're beautiful little books. We did like - one of them was the book on the Angry Women paintings. I don't know if you've seen that.

MS. RICHARDS: I think so.

MS. FISHMAN: And a little book of drawings, really beautiful book of drawings that this guy came over, and I had a stack of drawings. And I was going - because they had designed the Angry book, I was going to give them a couple drawings. And he said, "I can make a book out of these. Look at these. This is perfect. Let me take these, and I'll design a book." He had a book made in like 10 minutes, and it was beautiful.

[END CD 6.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Louise Fishman on December 21, 2009, in Chelsea, 526 West 26th Street, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc seven.

So you were talking about your visit to New Mexico.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes, I had driven -

MS. RICHARDS: After the fire.

MS. FISHMAN: - after the fire in - the fire was, I think, in '91 or -

MS. RICHARDS: And did that destroy art?

MS. FISHMAN: - it destroyed one major painting that I had just finished - a giant painting that had been influenced by the black paintings of Goya, and it was very exciting to me, this painting. Fortunately, all the other paintings that I had finished for a show at Lennon Weinberg had been moved upstairs to make room for more work. And so the paintings were upstairs. Because of the way the firehouse was built - the floor boards were running different directions, like the ceiling went -

MS. RICHARDS: Horizontal and vertical.

MS. FISHMAN: In any case, it was built in such a way that the fire didn't go upstairs. It destroyed my studio, and I had this one painting that was completely destroyed. When I walked in, one of the center braces, a charred center brace in the form of a crucifixion was standing upright in the middle of my studio. It was like, ah, fuck you. I couldn't believe it.

And I won't talk too much about the fire. There were drawings destroyed. There was actually one of the Auschwitz paintings that was destroyed. One was damaged. All of the others had to be cleaned. And the insurance company paid - the money that we got for a replacement of objects in the house went to repairing - \$30,000 worth of restoration - it probably would have cost a lot more now, but they had to clean all these paintings. And they were in the show.

MS. RICHARDS: The paintings that were upstairs just had smoke damage?

MS. FISHMAN: Yes, one of them was a painting that I had kept from the Auschwitz series, was cleaned - a painting called Four Questions. And in the transit from the gallery to my studio or something, it was damaged. And Jill Weinberg didn't have insurance on that. She didn't want to have carried insurance. And so she agreed to pay for the repair of it. It was repaired, but it never could be repaired properly because those paintings just are too fragile. And so we had to end up throwing it away. And that was one that I kept because I loved it so. It was really heartbreaking.

And then there was one small painting - the first four paintings I did, I kept from that group, and I never showed. One of them was damaged, and I reworked it several times. And actually, I like what happened to it, but it's totally different than -

MS. RICHARDS: So after that fire -

MS. FISHMAN: - so I was physically sick, and I was in terrible shape. I was crying all the time. I was really - it was like a nervous breakdown. It's pretty bad to have a fire in your workplace. It destroyed all my tools, all these tools that I've had since I was a young artist, brushes and knives and everything, and including work and - a lot of damage to, like, drawings; all slides were ruined, and a lot of stuff had to be thrown away. And - and so we went on this trip, really kind of a healing trip. We thought of it as a retreat.

I was - I had chronic fatigue, so I was not able to really drive; I'd even - I just slept in the back of this van.

MS. RICHARDS: You drove out to New Mexico.

MS. FISHMAN: Betsy drove, and I just laid in the back and looked out the window. And it's the only way I could have gotten out there. Anyway, we went out there, and we rented this house from Harmony -

MS. RICHARDS: In Galisteo?

MS. FISHMAN: In Galisteo. And one day, Betsy said, "I saw Agnes Martin walking along the road." And I knew she lived there, but I'd forgotten, because I tend to think of these people, the artists that I admire so, as out of reach. And of course, Harmony had her in her address book. I saw it. You know, her phone number. She was good friends. They were all good friends with her. They all took care of her, in Galisteo, because she really needed help. She needed people to take care of her.

And so one day, I called her up. It took a long time to gather my courage. I called her up, and I said I'd like to meet her. And she invited me and Betsy to come over for tea.

MS. RICHARDS: Did one of your mutual friends tell her who you were?

MS. FISHMAN: No. No, I said, I'm staying at Harmony Hammond's house. And that I'm an artist. Are you - are you allergic to something?

MS. RICHARDS: No.

MS. FISHMAN: And so she invited us for tea, and we went over to this -

MS. RICHARDS: It's very open for her to have a stranger come in.

MS. FISHMAN: Well, she really loved seeing artists, and she had a lot of friends who were artists, who dropped by. In fact, while I was there, Richard Tuttle and his wife dropped by, and they were chatting. And we sat around, and it was a funny conversation. And I noticed that it was like sitting with the Buddha.

[Kettle whistle blows.] I'm just going to get this.

MS. RICHARDS: Sure, yes.

[Audio Break.]

MS. FISHMAN: So I was looking at her, and she didn't say anything. And she had this very solid look. She was physically very solid, still. And she just looked at me. She just looked. And I looked at her, and I thought, this is a meditation we're doing. And - because that's what I understood. It's the only way I could understand it. I was like, okay, I'm meditating. I'm into my breath and we sat there.

And then every once in a while she'd say something. And Betsy was a little more forthright. Betsy's very animated and interested. And she said, "So, Agnes, you must" - no, she said, "You must have made a lot of money by now." And Agnes said, "I've got millions." [They laugh.]

I was like -

MS. RICHARDS: That was a question an artist would never have asked.

MS. FISHMAN: I know it. I know. But she - Betsy's very - she's a real rich personality, and she really knows people. She can really - and she says stuff -

MS. RICHARDS: She knew she wouldn't be offending her.

MS. FISHMAN: No. She's western. Betsy comes from Wyoming. And she has this - and Agnes comes from Western Canada. And there was this - Betsy is a no-nonsense person. Like, I don't know - "Well, Agnes, you must be very rich now. You must now" - she had a Mercedes in the driveway. And she said, "I don't know what to do with this money." She said, "My dealer bought me a Mercedes. I hardly drive it." [Laughs.] But that comment, I got millions, was priceless.

And we had a really nice visit and -

MS. RICHARDS: Did she talk about art?

MS. FISHMAN: No, no. No, we just - I don't remember too much about what we discussed. It was really just like getting to know each other a little bit.

MS. RICHARDS: She didn't ask you about your work? Did you have a sense that she knew your work at all?

MS. FISHMAN: No, I doubt it. I doubt it. I think she may have looked me up. I don't know if she was computer - I doubt that she was computer savvy.

MS. RICHARDS: How long ago was that?

MS. FISHMAN: And that was in the '90s.

MS. RICHARDS: No, no, she wasn't.

MS. FISHMAN: She wouldn't have - yeah - no, she probably didn't. But I don't know. She asked me about my painting, I think. She considered herself an Abstract Expressionist, which I thought was so fascinating. Always I

thought that. And I was nervous, you know, but I felt, you know, like she was wonderful.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you eat together?

MS. FISHMAN: Not then, but she - I said, "Well, would you like to get together again?" And she said, well - she liked to be taken to this one restaurant. And she got, like, a steak, some kind of steak, and a "daiquiri." That's what she called it, a daiquiri. And that's what she got.

And we drove her over there. She was very silent. I drove. Betsy sat back and photographed from the back. Betsy would never photograph a person surreptitiously, but from the back, she thought that was okay. So the photographs are with me and Agnes driving along. And then there are photographs of Agnes walking outside. It was in a public space. But no photographs of her to speak of - Betsy was very discreet.

And so anyway, it was a very nice visit. And then I called her again. And she invited me to come by myself. And she showed me her studio. And that was really thrilling for me. I didn't want to bother her too much. But anyway, she took me. "Do you want to come see the studio? I built this myself, you know." She said, "Well, I got a local guy to - I couldn't carry those rafters. I couldn't handle those, and so he did that, but I built the rest of it."

And so she took me in her studio, showed me a lot of drawings. She went through - this one, I like this one here. And they were so beautiful, these drawings. And she showed me new paintings that were about to go to Pace [Gallery, New York, NY] for her next show. And I was looking at them, and I thought, these are meditations. I haven't really understood that so much until I met her and saw her with them. Probably, it's obvious, but hadn't been obvious, like, how they were made. That was a meditation, going across like that.

I would never have been able to have that kind - sustain that kind of regularity and go from one painting to the next with that kind of continuity. And I thought, okay, the grid. This is about the grid. And it's about this aspect of the grid, of meditation.

So when I went back to New York, I'd done a lot of drawings and rubbings. I had these shards that I found, and I used rubbing stones. And I used graphite, and then I rubbed them with the polishing stones. So I had this really - a very interesting body of work, a small body of work of drawings, very - you know, I couldn't paint; it took much energy. But these are really - they're lovely. I still have some left.

And when I got to New York, I started doing these little handmade books, because I wanted to make something for myself. And I wanted to go back to that grid. And I wanted to have work - to make work that was a meditation.

I've used meditation in my paintings, but this was about really just staying with my breath and staying with this mark in a different way.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think you would have done those if you had not had this sense of fatigue and if you hadn't had the inability to do your normal, larger paintings?

MS. FISHMAN: I probably wouldn't have done it. And I probably wouldn't have gone out to Santa Fe or Galisteo. I probably wouldn't have met her.

It's all like a chain of things, but because of that, that happened. And it's sort of my interest in those Native American cultures, the architecture; the space is the sipapu and the mountain - the Navajos living right up against the mountain, the whole business about rocks and the mountains. It was like - and a lot of it came from China, the ideas about the mountain. I, you know, think it's Eastern, all that continents moving apart and so on. So it made a lot of sense to me.

And so I actually was involved in that grid; started out small, and then the grid expanded and changed. And I haven't really used the grid in that way since the '60s, and in some of the experimental work that I did, I used the grid. But it was like a re-forming of the grid. And the grid, I think, has always been central. It's always been the footing for me.

So that led to a lot of other work and a lot of other thoughts about - and then I did get involved in - I can't remember when I started doing that meditation. It was later, I think. I went on retreats. And it sort of all began to tie together - going on retreats and quieting my life down and quieting the process of work down, so that I was really able to not be swept away by the activity of everything. And that was really crucial.

That's something very hard to remember at times, especially in New York.

MS. RICHARDS: You talked about your painting slowing down in the '90s at some point. I guess there was a show of paintings from '97 and '98. You said the paintings were slow, slow for the viewer, slow to be painted. Was that connected in any way to this - the retreats and the -

MS. FISHMAN: Oh, probably. I'm trying to remember what paintings - do you have any titles?

MS. RICHARDS: Black Beauty, Blue to Blue [1992].

MS. FISHMAN: Oh, those are - Black Beauty was -

MS. RICHARDS: I think those were the ones. Night Shining White [1998]?

MS. FISHMAN: They had a lot of to do with the rocks. And they did come pretty much out of - you know, whenever something happens in my life, like the fire, or like going out there and looking at stuff, and kind of looking at that Native American art, and - that stuff - and the scholar's rocks, all of that is connected. And so those paintings, like Black Beauty, that has a lot to do with the rocks, those spaces and shapes. And some of the other, that white - what is it called - that's -

MS. RICHARDS: Night Shining White.

MS. FISHMAN: Night Shining White - that's from poetry, someplace or other. And yes, it's just part of that, like part of that material - I don't know. It's hard to talk about without being able to look at my paintings again. But it feels like 100 years ago that I did those paintings.

MS. RICHARDS: Ten years ago is a long time.

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah, I'm really - I tend to think of it as if it's just yesterday. It's not. It's like -

MS. RICHARDS: More than 10 years.

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah. But the rocks had a lot to do with the paintings. And there was a lot - what I was saying was, each experience I have has a lot of resonance for a long time; like it's not just about what I do immediately, but it's about how it keeps going through the work, like that Auschwitz experience. The experience of being there, plus the experience of doing that body of work, continued to affect things in my painting. It doesn't just stop. It's not like a - there's a - things that just continue to operate.

So there's really no - and then there's other new things that come in. And '97, '98 is when Betsy and I were starting to have a really hard time, and we separated in '99. That was the hardest - that's been one of the hardest things in my life, that relationship ending. And it's hard for both of us to this day. But it's one of those things.

Anyway -

MS. RICHARDS: You did some works in 2000, or you're quoted around then as saying you were reading Emily Dickinson's poetry at that time. Is that one of those elements that have seeped into your work and remained?

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah, I think it's hard not to have Wallace Stevens and Emily Dickinson - they're so visual, both of them, and I felt - I don't feel a lot of connection with other painters; some I do, but not a lot. I feel more connected to some of the poets and writers and photographers, for sure.

MS. RICHARDS: That's interesting.

MS. FISHMAN: And the poetry and the music - I mean, there are other forms that come in that seem to have more to do with - and I'm not sure why this is, how I get to my work and what it is I end up doing. And what it's laden with.

I'm not sure if it's good or bad that I - or neither - that I am not part of an art community. I'm sort of part of an art community, but I'm peripheral. I think I still am. I always was, and I still am. Like when I came to New York, I was peripheral because I was a lesbian. I couldn't be part of that - that was when Abstract Expressionists were still around. I thought I'd be part of that - I was coming to New York; I was going to be that. I learned in two seconds that wasn't going to be the case. And I just stayed away. In a lot of ways, I think that was good for my work that I stayed away from all the communities.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you felt that your relationship to the art world has changed substantially over the decades?

MS. FISHMAN: I just have a couple of friends who are artists, not very many. Dona Nelson, I would say, is the most consistent painter friend that I have, and I don't see a lot of her, but we're close. And I love her work. And I think she's a - like the quintessential painter. I have tremendous respect for her work. I always like seeing her and hearing her. And she's much more involved in the - a lot of theoretical stuff about painting. She reads a lot. I don't really care that much about postmodern and post-postmodern and post-post-postmodern. But it's interesting every once in a while to hear her talk, but I'm not actively involved in it. I'm pretty primitive in a lot

of ways. I'm not very primitive. That's an illusion of mine that I'm primitive.

MS. RICHARDS: So all these other art forms - poetry, music - impacting your working. You play the piano yourself?

MS. FISHMAN: I started studying several years ago. Actually, my teacher is successful as a concert pianist - and he's a good friend. And so, occasionally, he gives me a lesson. And I could really use more lessons. But I just sit down, and I play the pieces that we were learning - that I was learning. I'm very basic, although he gave me a lot of interesting music to play. I've had a little [Dmitri] Shostakovich. I played some [Béla] Bartok and Haydn, [George Frideric] Handel.

MS. RICHARDS: So you're fairly accomplished if you can play those.

MS. FISHMAN: So I would - no, I'm not fairly accomplished. It's just that I love music, and what he said - when I was in high school, I always wanted a piano. I always wanted to play the piano, from the time I was a little kid. My parents never got me a piano. They could have rented it. They never rented it. They didn't care. And it was like, don't do that. When I was older, I still wanted one. So when I was 15, I think, or 14, they gave me a piano. It's a little late, isn't it? I only had a couple of years before I started school. And I started studying. And the teacher I had thought I was very talented.

In fact, she said, "You're way behind. Most students start when they're kids, but still, you're talented." And she even had somebody - the conductor of the Saint Louis Symphony - come up, who was a friend of hers, to listen to me play this piece. And he gave - wrote me some criticism of what I was doing and told me that I should be encouraged. And she wanted me to go to school there. She said, "I think I can get you a scholarship, but you really have to be willing to work hard because you're way behind." And I didn't really want to be a musician, because I didn't want to be out there. I didn't want to be up on the stage.

So I didn't pursue it. I liked it a lot. And I ended up listening to piano music all the time. And I started thinking, you know, I want a piano. I want to learn how to play again. So my piano teacher said, "You have a natural way with the piano, the way you use your hands. You act like you know the piano." I said, "I know." And so I don't - so I could, but I am not as disciplined, so - I could.

MS. RICHARDS: But you have it here and not in your home.

MS. FISHMAN: Well, I have a tiny studio apartment, and it's a little hard to - embarrassing to play in the building.

MS. RICHARDS: You don't disturb neighbors here, you mean.

MS. FISHMAN: Well, it's my space next door.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, so this is -

MS. FISHMAN: People can hear it, but -

MS. RICHARDS: - more private.

MS. FISHMAN: - a little more, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And you have an exercise machine, too.

MS. FISHMAN: Oh, for my - for my -

MS. RICHARDS: Do you do both of these to take breaks during the day?

MS. FISHMAN: - yes, well, that I have to do for my knee. The piano is a very good foil for the paintings when I stop work. And sometimes when I can't paint, I just play. It's a nice discipline. It's completely different. And it's good because it has a formal tradition of its own-it's on the page. And it's that grid again.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you go to museums and galleries regularly?

MS. FISHMAN: I don't go a lot. Lately, I can't do much.

MS. RICHARDS: Because of your knees.

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah, and I've been in a lot - I was traveling a lot to Florida to see my father, particularly. And so my schedule was very disrupted. And also I was going to Berlin, you know, to show.

MS. RICHARDS: Your own show.

MS. FISHMAN: I had a show there, and I was in a group show there, and I visited several times.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you enjoy going to Berlin?

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah, I do. I like it, and I'm very fond of my dealer there. He's a wonderful man. And he loves to take me to places and show me things. So it's a great treat.

And so I've traveled more than it's actually comfortable for me, because I need a lot of stability in the studio, time stability.

MS. RICHARDS: You don't ever have assistants, do you? I know you have someone helping with your archive, but in the studio, you have assistants?

MS. FISHMAN: No, although when I put a big painting on that easel - that's an electronic easel - I have to get someone from the gallery to come over and help me, because I can't lift it that way anymore. It's very heavy. There's a thing that attaches to the stretcher bars, a metal thing that gets screwed into the braces of the canvas, and then it's lifted on to the easel. And then I can adjust it up and down.

MS. RICHARDS: Height?

MS. FISHMAN: It also can flip upside down with those pedals. And I work on that painting until I'm finished; it stays on that easel. So that's the only painting that doesn't move,

MS. RICHARDS: So when it flips, you're working on it upside down.

MS. FISHMAN: - sometimes, if I can't reach it properly, I'll flip it, and then I'll - or I'll look at it upside down. And sometimes I can figure out formal problems by doing that. It's not always accurate, because upside down is upside down, and it does have to do with a kind of balance, and the earth being there. But it is interesting how it - some things become clear when they're upside down.

I'm very private in the studio. I would - it'd be very hard for me to have anybody in here. I wouldn't want anybody in here while I'm working.

MS. RICHARDS: So you don't really feel you have much time to go to museums and galleries on a regular basis.

MS. FISHMAN: No, I don't on a regular basis. Even being here, in a way, I have a difficult time with this neighborhood. There's too much art. It's a funny thing to say, but there's too many people floating around, openings, crowds, galleries, artists. It's like, "Oh, God, enough." I need a little more, I mean, this space is really private. Once I'm in here, it is really quiet. And my floor is a blessing. It's a very quiet floor. There aren't galleries, and it's quiet. And I really thrive on that -

MS. RICHARDS: And you go up to the country and spend the entire summer?

MS. FISHMAN: No, I can't, because I work here. I only have a place to work here, and I had to sell the firehouse building because I could - when Betsy and I separated, I bought her half of the farm, but I couldn't afford to maintain a separate building. And by myself, it's not so easy to just spend long periods of time up there. I'm not a loner. You probably guessed that. I'm alone in the studio, but I like seeing my friends, and I like going out and having coffee.

MS. RICHARDS: So why do you keep that place up there?

MS. FISHMAN: Because when I get up there, it feels like I'm home. It feels - there is - the sky is there. The trees are there. It's as if my heart just goes out to this place. It's an extraordinarily beautiful place. It's not about having a country place. It's about having nirvana.

It's splendid. And I walk to the top of the hill, and I turn around. And - you can't find a more beautiful place. It's just spectacular. And there is a pond that I put in, and you can swim in, paths in the woods that I used to maintain, with my little tractor, little outbuildings throughout the woods.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you have other people to help you maintain it?

MS. FISHMAN: I have somebody - comes - mows the lawn in the spring, summer, and early fall. And I have somebody who has his phone connected to the furnace emergency thing if something happens to the furnace. And he'll go over before the pipes freeze.

It doesn't need a lot of maintenance. It's pretty self-sufficient. I put a lot of money into fixing things, roofs and cellars and furnaces; a lot of things had to be repaired. And it's in pretty good shape.

And it's not practical, but when I go up there, it's like - and it doesn't cost much to maintain it. It is very - even heating it is - it heats up in five minutes. It's just very, you know, low ceilings, and it's an older building - old building. So I don't - I'm not - as long as I don't feel guilty not being there, I'm okay.

And so I don't know what's going to happen, but I'm not ready - still not ready to sell it.

MS. RICHARDS: How would you say your work is changing now from your last show? What new directions do you think your work is taking?

MS. FISHMAN: I don't have any idea yet. I'm just sort of -

MS. RICHARDS: Is that usual that you really don't know until after the paintings are done and you look at the show?

MS. FISHMAN: Yes, and then I can evaluate what it is that's happened. I usually walk away from a show and have some thoughts about what I did. This show, I felt like - I just was much happier than I've ever been with a show. I felt like I was able to get to some things that I didn't even realize I was doing.

MS. RICHARDS: The titles all somehow connect to nature or to a physical relationship to the natural world, rather than literature or Jewish tradition or other kinds of things: Fire and Ice [2009], Cooked and Burnt [2007], the physical reality of the world.

MS. FISHMAN: Well, Cooked and Burnt is what was on [12th-century Persian poet] Rumi's gravestone.

MS. RICHARDS: And Slippery Slope [2006], these all have physical -

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah, they're also from poetry. Slippery Slope is, I think, Emily Dickinson. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. Cooked and Burnt is from Rumi. It's from what it was on his gravestone. It was, "I was raw. Now, I'm cooked and burnt." And that was such a - that was really a beautiful title, beautiful thing.

There's a rawness that I like in this work. I mean, I see it differently than most people do; and then in retrospect, I'll see it differently than I do now. A lot of times, I think my work is kind of ugly. And then I find that it's actually pretty and I didn't know it.

MS. RICHARDS: Or it goes back and forth.

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah, yeah. But I find myself really digging into it and feeling a coarseness and just how to get to the bottom of things. But - and sometimes, I don't know what I've done. I think, well, who would like that painting? That was the first one sold. A couple of paintings sold before the show, like from art fairs that came up before the show happened; there were two paintings. And that was one of the first ones. I said, "Damn, that's one I would have kept if I could have." But it really was my favorite painting.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you actually get to keep paintings if you -

MS. FISHMAN: I could if I wanted to. It's hard for me to keep things, probably because I don't have space to - I don't have a place to hang a painting.

MS. RICHARDS: You must have some of your paintings hanging in your, even, small apartment.

MS. FISHMAN: I don't have any. I have -

MS. RICHARDS: On purpose?

MS. FISHMAN: I had one little painting that I really love to look at, and I had it for a year or so, and then I moved it. I don't really like having my work around all the time.

I'm about to change what's in my apartment. I own about five [William] Eggleston photographs that I got through my gallery. I love photography, and I love his photographs. And so I've been looking at - and I have a photograph that I did of a horse. It's truly quite beautiful. But I'm ready to start moving them around and putting something else there. But no, I don't have - I don't think I have anything of mine - a painting by my mother, a painting by my aunt.

MS. RICHARDS: Better to keep your work separate from where you're living?

MS. FISHMAN: It's quieter without my paintings. I would like to have my studio close to my apartment at this point in my life. And then I could look at something. I could move something - a drawing, like one of those drawings, take it to my apartment and look at it. But this is very compact and contained here. And that's where

it happens, and that's where the work is.

MS. RICHARDS: So at this moment, and the work you have here, what would you say drives you to continue painting and working at [laughs] this extremely difficult pursuit?

MS. FISHMAN: Well, it's the only thing I know how to do. It's the only -it's what engages me. Nothing - I'm interested in a lot of things, but nothing engages me that I do except for painting and relationships with people.

MS. RICHARDS: What would you say are your greatest challenges with your work right now?

MS. FISHMAN: Well, one is being physically able to do what I want to do, because it's really troubling to have pain. I don't like having pain. When this floor gets covered, it'll be a little different. But that's one, obviously, right now. And the other one is to maintain - I think it's - I hope I can maintain this critical connection I have to working because, you know - and I always doubt it from one show to the next. Like, can I push this as far as it needs to go to make it be meaningful?

MS. RICHARDS: And not repeat yourself.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes, certainly not repeat - there's repetitive things, and I was thinking, God, it's easy for me to do things that are appealing. So I have to really examine them.

For me, what I find appealing is, like, that it's not enough just to leave something - sometimes I don't know what it is I've done, or I need time to really look, to understand, because there could be something new and I don't see it. Because a lot of things I don't see until I've looked for a while.

MS. RICHARDS: When you finish a body of work in preparation for an exhibition - I guess you know way ahead that you're going to have a show - do you yourself edit and say, I'm not going to put it in the show, or do you trust your dealer to select the works for the show?

MS. FISHMAN: John usually does, but if I didn't like something, I wouldn't let him take it. I haven't felt that strongly about any paintings that he's liked.

MS. RICHARDS: Does he plan the installation, or are you actively involved in that?

MS. FISHMAN: Well, we talk about doing it together, and then I walk in and it's already done. And I walk in, and occasionally I move something, but often the bulk of the show is just right on the money. John - the only thing that happened that I did not like is the business with these white frames that ended up on paintings.

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you about that frames.

MS. FISHMAN: And I didn't - it was too - he'd already put frames on all these paintings, and they were all - it was a lot of paintings, and they were all butting up against - they were too close to one another. It was too late. I mean, another person would have said, "Take these goddamned frames off." But I was intimidated by the fact that it was already done.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that surprising that he would do that without asking you?

MS. FISHMAN: He does things without asking me, like for instance, [laughs] and -

MS. RICHARDS: He thinks they're in your best interest.

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah, well, he has good judgment a lot of the time. In this case, it wasn't good judgment.

MS. RICHARDS: But frames are a major question for a painter.

MS. FISHMAN: Absolutely. And he explained to me early on. He said, "It's hard to sell these paintings because they're very different from one another and collectors are not the smartest people on earth, necessarily." And he said, "They don't know a whole lot sometimes, and they like to see the same - they like to be able to recognize a person's work." So it's more difficult when your work keeps changing, and it keeps changing. And they are - what's the right way to describe it? They go off the canvas a lot. They're not all contained. So he said, "This framing helps these collectors see them better." It may have been true in the gallery, when there's just one or two - but to put my paintings in a show together, with all of these frames, they were really bulky and off.

And we were in installation time when I saw it. And so I - and I said to him later, "I don't want these frames on my paintings anymore." And sometimes he agrees, and then he does what he wants. John is - he's good. He's a very good dealer in general.

But like for instance one little thing - and I don't mind this too much - the Baryshnikov [Dance] Foundation [New York, NY] asked for a couple of paintings to be rotated in their board room. There was a [Julian] Schnabel there for the last year, and they asked for me to have a painting. And so they were contacting me, "Would you select a painting?" And I said I was going to talk to John. And I have left messages to John: "We need to go and look at the space and decide on a painting." I get an e-mail from the gallery; this is the painting John selected. Well, it's a good painting and it's a beautiful painting. And it's big. And it'll look beautiful there. But he didn't let me participate in it.

And it's like - how important is this? I think sometime when I'm having a drink with him, I'm going to have to say, you know, "John, you have to think twice before you - I know you're good at what you do, but you've got to include me, because the time is when I need to have input."

He is good, but that's a little bit of a problem.

MS. RICHARDS: What would you say would be a dream project, something you always wanted to do and you haven't been able to do yet?

MS. FISHMAN: Well, I'd like to put a retrospective together, because I think it'd be very interesting. People have no idea what I've done. Like very few people have any sense of the continuity of my work or the range of it. And I think it - and there're some really good paintings from different periods. And I think it would be interesting.

You know, for a long time, I didn't want to do a retrospective, because it felt like an ending and I felt like I didn't want to go near that or - and I also didn't want to go near that work, of doing it. I didn't want it to be taken away - it's hard enough to paint. I didn't want to have so much in the way, and that would be - it certainly would take up a lot of space. But that's not a big issue.

MS. RICHARDS: If you were planning a retrospective, would you include - I know we didn't talk about your prints. Would you include the prints and the drawings and the books, works on paper? Sometimes painters, when you see a retrospective, you wish you were seeing more of those works that you might think were secondary, but actually - would you include those?

MS. FISHMAN: I would like to. They'd have to be in a separate room, in vitrines, the books. There's also little sculptures and things. But, yes, I think drawings - people don't know my drawings. They've never really been shown. I've never had a drawing show.

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you about that.

MS. FISHMAN: And I've lots of drawings and prints. I did a whole new group of prints in the spring that are really good.

MS. RICHARDS: Monotypes and all kinds of experimental materials.

MS. FISHMAN: Yeah, yeah, yeah, they're really - I love working with Sue Oehme at Riverhouse.

MS. RICHARDS: Riverhouse Editions, that's in [Denver] Colorado.

MS. FISHMAN: Yes, it's really a terrific place. We worked twice, and they're ready to have me back again. And I really do enjoy going out there. So I might do it sooner than later.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, thank you. Is there anything else that you'd want to talk about before we close?

MS. FISHMAN: Well, one thing is that the prints and drawings often prefigure stuff, and I don't do drawings or prints with the intention of making a painting from them, ever. But they find their way later. Often it's stuff I wouldn't do in painting yet, because there's - it's easier to throw color into them. It's easier to have new, kind of, configurations in them. And they may occur in paintings and they get painted out, but - and then they'll show up. So I noticed that that process really does affect the paintings later. And they are - there is a freshness, and there's stuff that comes up in the drawings that shows other parts of my work that I think could shed light on what the paintings are about and not what people often think they're about.

MS. RICHARDS: Well I look forward to that retrospective!

MS. FISHMAN: [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Thank you.

[END CD 7.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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